

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a (NIV)

¹² Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. ¹⁵ Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁷ 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? ¹⁸ But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹ If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, but one body. 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!” ²² On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, ²⁴ while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, ²⁵ so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. ²⁶ If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. ²⁸ 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. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.

Sermon: Unity, Diversity, and Interdependence

In a week’s time it will be Superbowl Sunday! Right now the teams are training hard, and studying the opposing team’s strengths and weaknesses, and devising various strategies for the big day. But just prior to the game itself, you can be sure the coach will be giving an inspirational and memorable pep-talk to his players. Amongst other things, the coach will remind them to work together as a *team* and not get carried away with seeking individual glory.¹

Paul’s analogy of the Church as a human body sounds very much like a team talk. It certainly *is* that, but, as we will see, this does little justice to the profound metaphor Paul uses and the seriousness of his message for the young church at Corinth. Pep-talks are, after all, for *specific* occasions; what Paul is describing is the long-term *culture* of life in Christ. Moreover, the analogy breaks down because, despite

¹ This brings to mind the catch-phrase of *The Three Musketeers*, “All for one and one for all”!

the diversity in the roles of the team members, they are *all strong* athletes and the coach's *best-possible* team for the game. The Church will *inevitably* have even greater diversity than that in a tactical sport like football. That's why Paul is not really describing a team, but a *novel* way of living. This is, I think, a profound idea and one we will explore briefly this morning.

The church community as a human body is one of the most celebrated analogies of Paul's writings, but it was not unique to him. He was adapting a well-known analogy from the Greco-Roman world in which the functional *diversity* in a *city* (Gk. *Polis*) was compared to that in a body.² Traditionally, the analogy had been used to *reinforce* hierarchy, suggesting that the lowly workers should support those with power and influence, whether that was in politics, commerce, or the military. In other words, it was used to promote harmony by the governing classes who wanted those at the bottom of the social ladder to remember their place and to be grateful for the guidance and protection of their superiors!³ Even today, talented CEOs are deemed far more important than janitors, and this is reflected in their relative salaries. Paul, as we will see, inverts the force of the metaphor.

He begins, "For just as the body is one and has many limbs and organs . . . so it is *with Christ*."⁴ Paul does *not* finish that phrase with, "so it is with *the Church*," as we might expect; instead he makes a direct connection to the Messiah.⁵ The Church is *not* merely a human organization, it is brought into being by the activity of the Holy Spirit which binds believers into the very life of the risen Messiah. The Church is *not* just another social club or aid organisation; the distinctive difference is that we are "*in Christ*." We live in him and he is us.⁶ Now it's often said that the Church is the "hands and feet of Jesus"⁷ and that "he has no hands but our hands."⁸ Thank God that's *not* true! Yes, God wants to bless the world *through* the Church and when we fail to live up to our calling, things don't get done that should be done - and evil continues.⁹ We are fallible and frail and that is why we confess both what we have done and what we fail to do, and we receive forgiveness *and* strength to persevere. Being "*in Christ*," then, is important because it establishes and affirms our collective identity *in him* through baptism, and it reminds us that the living Christ is *bigger* than the Church. Put another way, the wind of God's Spirit is not solely restricted to the Church but goes ahead of God's mission to the world.¹⁰

² In Corinth's history it was a "city-state" and hence the analogy is very apt. Note the analogy is organic, not mechanistic.

³ It's the brain that makes the crucial decisions and it is the lowly organs, muscles, blood-flow, etc. that sustains it!

⁴ 1 Cor 12: 12. The words "limbs and organs" retain the sense of *diversity* of the body, whereas the word "member" does not.

⁵ Scholars have long debated whether the designation of the church as "*the body* of Christ" (v27) is a mere metaphor or mystical (ontological) reality. "The body of Christ" is certainly a metaphor, but many go on to claim that this image illuminates a deeper truth about the Church's union in - or participation with - the Messiah, who is the representative of the renewed Israel. See also Col 3:19-14; Rom 12:4-5; Eph 4:25, 5:30. Note, in 1 Corinthians, Paul does *not* say Christ is the *head* of the Church. That analogy is made in Col 1:18; Eph 5:23. (Such subtleties give grounds for scholars to debate Paul's *personal* authorship of those particular letters.) This adds a significant new layer to the underlying metaphor.

⁶ See John 15:1-17, especially v4.

⁷ Words to this effect can be found in Christian music, e.g., *If We Are The Body* by Casting Crowns.

⁸ This is expressed in the following poem: "He has no hands but our hands to do his work today. He has no feet but our feet to lead men in his way. He has no voice but our voice to tell men how he died. He has no help but our help to lead them to his side." (Cited by William Barclay in his commentary on Corinthians, p 134).

⁹ This is referred to as the "sins of omission" (as opposed to the "sins of commission") in the traditional liturgy.

¹⁰ This is modelled in the story of Cornelius in Acts 10.

Paul goes on to say, “Whether we are Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, we are all made to drink of the one Spirit.”¹¹ First, “drinking the Spirit” here has nothing to do with Holy Communion. It is simply a vivid expression of Paul’s conviction that we have been given the Spirit in an *overflowing* abundance to everyone within the Church community.¹² Second, ethnicity and social standing are distinguishing features of *our* world, ones that are often used to create division within communities. “Through baptism we *are already* one in Christ,” says Paul, “whether or not you believe that is the case – so live like you are what you are!” Notice that this image of a body preserves and honours diversity; unity and diversity are not incompatible. We are *not* all the same and we are not *meant* to be all the same - thank goodness! God loves a varied family!

Paul then goes on to amplify his body analogy by first addressing persons at Corinth who have lower self-esteem and seeks to reassure them of their *importance* and *necessity* to the body.¹³ A body wouldn’t be a body without limbs. And the ears should not be envious of the eyes because *all* the sensory experiences are needed! Too many Christians today have low self-esteem because they feel inadequate, lacking in giftedness, and in faith, hope, and holiness. That is obviously *not* what God wants! Jesus is the Saviour of the World, not just the chosen few, and he has a special place and role for *each* one of us. However, it is only by exercising what faith we have that will we grow in faith, and it is only by sharing God’s love with others that we will we grow in virtue.¹⁴

In the previous section of 1 Corinthians 12, which we covered last week,¹⁵ Paul emphasises, “There are different kinds of gifts, *but the same Spirit distributes them*,”¹⁶ and he repeats that summary, “All these [gifts] are the work of one and the same Spirit, *and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines*.”¹⁷ In today’s reading concerning the body, he reiterates the same point, “But in fact *God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be*.”¹⁸ This is *not* the opiate of the people, because this message is for *everyone* in the church. Paul stresses *God*¹⁹ is both the *source* of everyone’s gifts, services, and activities, *and the distributor* of them *for the common good*. And because that is the case, there is no place for pride, boasting, or competitiveness.²⁰ Diversity is inevitable and *desirable* in a body, and *interdependence* is also essential.²¹

¹¹ 1 Cor 12:13; see also Gal 3:28, which suggests this is part of an early baptismal liturgy. Paul likely omits the reference to “male and female” here because such things were creating problems (1 Cor 7, 11:2–16) and so may have been a distraction.

¹² See also John 7:37-39; 1 Cor 10:3-4. The result of being immersed in the Spirit is that we are made into one body. [“Baptism in the Spirit” is not an experience subsequent to that of becoming a Christian. Nevertheless, we can from time-to-time have intense experiences of new spiritual awareness - an *aha* moment - when the Spirit seems more present than at other times.]

¹³ To those who do not have spectacular gifts, you are part of the body and you are indeed. And to those who do have special gift, don’t think that you are the be all and end all of what the body needs!

¹⁴ Such as: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control; see Gal 5:22-23.

¹⁵ <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Concerning-Spiritual-Things.pdf>

¹⁶ 1 Cor 12:4.

¹⁷ 1 Cor 12:11.

¹⁸ 1 Cor 12:18; see also 24b-25.

¹⁹ Father, Son, and Spirit – see 1 Cor 12:3-6.

²⁰ 1 Cor 3:21;

²¹ Paul says, “To those who do *not* have spectacular gifts, you are part of the body and you are indeed. And to those who *do* have special gift, don’t think that you are the be all and end all of what the body needs!”

Paul then addresses that elitist group in Corinth in the new few verses.²² Paul is making it very clear that those who flaunt their supposedly more spectacular gifts, or those of higher social standing who therefore think they confer prestige on the church, are no more important than the faithful, humble, hard-praying, or hard-working members whose value may be overlooked by the power seekers. Paul's use of the analogy of a body is, therefore, countercultural to its use in his own day.²³ He urges the more privileged or visible members of the community to respect the contributions of those who they consider to be their inferiors, both in social status and in spiritual potency. No one should be made to feel a second-class Christian in the church. That is an affront to Christ! Everyone needs to have a sense of belonging. He concludes: "God has put the body together . . . 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 honored, every part rejoices with it."²⁴

That is what Paul said to the church at Corinth, which makes you think, what might Paul say to the Church today?²⁵ Three things come to my mind. First, it's clear Paul hated division in the Church and did all that he could to maintain unity in the body. It made no sense to him for people to divide what God's Spirit has united (in baptism). Sadly, schism has been a major feature of Church History; its continued proliferation should be both a cause of embarrassment and concern – because it damages the cause of Christ. If Paul were writing to Amherstburg, his letter would be to *all* the churches here – not just to St. Andrew's.²⁶ Now, we are not able to unravel the complex history that leaves the Christ's body in this fragmented state. But we can agree *not* to perpetuate the issues and, instead, seek the common good in our communities and cooperate together. Paul would say, "You *need* each other, therefore discern what God's Spirit is doing in each tradition and form partnerships that cross boundaries. Paul was a realist and knew exactly what he was saying; the cultural boundaries between Greek, Jew, slave and free were huge in the Corinthian society and seemed insurmountable, as do the issues surrounding Christian unity today. Yet Paul also recognised that God's Spirit and the power of *love* was up to that challenge.

Second, Paul was an insightful man and a cultural analyst; he was a practicing tent-maker by trade²⁷ and therefore in touch with everyday society. He would recognise today's common perception that one can be a "loner-Christian," when someone says: "I can be a 'Christian' without going to church." While given the dysfunction in many churches, one can see why this idea sounds attractive; but this is like saying, "I can live on a diet of bread and water"! What this means is that some people want to belong

²² 1 Cor 12: 21-24.

²³ That being the case, some say this adaptation of the metaphor is his unique, or original, contribution to its future use.

²⁴ 1 Cor 12:24b-26. See also Rom 12:15, 15:1; Gal 6:2. Moreover, if I have a toothache, my whole body suffers – and likely my family does as well! We do not say to an Olympic sprinter, "I congratulate your legs," we congratulate the person! Note too that Paul's conception of the Christian community - as one that *shares* the sufferings of others - departs from the ancient Greek and Roman ideals of the dispassionate self-sufficiency – a heartless attitude that still abounds today.

²⁵ See also Tim Reddish, *The Amish Farmer Who Hated L.A.* (Deep River Books, 2015), 91-102, especially p94-5,97-98.

²⁶ The Church in Corinth met in various people's homes, unlikely one location; nevertheless, Paul's treats them all as one.

²⁷ This likely included working with leather too.

without belonging! However, “belonging” means *participating*.²⁸ And this means engaging in the messiness and joys of *real* relationships, which is not the same as ‘friending’ people on Facebook! We *need* each other.

I think his third message for today can be illustrated with another related metaphor for the Church, namely that of a cross. The horizontal timber corresponds to the relationships within the church and the wider community. This correlates well with the body metaphor that Paul was stressing. But there is also the vertical piece of wood that is equally necessary to make a “cross.” This corresponds to the church’s relationship with God. Paul, in speaking to the Corinthian church, was fully aware of the vitality of their dynamic, genuine worship.²⁹ Their present weakness is not the vertical timber but the horizontal member of the wooden cross; their disunited relationships with each other. Paul wants *both to be in balance* or, in the words of Jesus, “Love God *and* love your neighbour!”³⁰ Balance is always difficult to achieve in our own lives, but we know if we work toward that goal, it will enhance our health and wellbeing. The same is true in a church, a church that scores high on loving relationships needs to balance that with loving God [and vice versa]. I think Paul would identify this as a key issue that many traditional churches in the West face - a lack of a passionate spirituality. Loving *both* God *and* your neighbour is what will make a church spiritually healthy and aid growth.

Unity *not* division, interdependence *not* individualism, and building up both the body and connecting with God; those are three things that I think Paul would stress for us today. As I said at the beginning, this is much more than a pep-talk, it describes a new way of living; this, then, is the *culture* of life “in Christ.” What do we think? Do we buy-in to Paul’s vision? Are we up for his challenge? Let us pray.

²⁸ Do not misunderstand me here: this is not meant to guilt or overburden busy people, but to remind us all that the Church functions because God works in and through every one of us.

²⁹ See 1 Cor 1:5-9.

³⁰ Mark 12:30-31; Matt 22:36-40.