

"Members United as One Body in Christ"

The last several weeks we have been talking about Christ's vision for his church. We've talked a lot about the ministry of the church. We've said that this ministry needs to be an ordinary means of grace ministry. And one thing that has been a bit assumed as we've talked about the church is that the church is made up of members. The church includes you. A biblical vision of the church sees that the church is made up of believers who are united together in Christ. Of course we've already been seeing that. We looked at the Great Commission which calls the church to be making disciples. You are its disciples. We saw that preaching Christ crucified is only of value to those who have been called by God. You are those called by God. We've seen in Baptism, that those who are baptized have been baptized into the body of Christ. You are the body of Christ. We've seen in the Lord's Supper that those who partake of the Supper, are in fellowship with Christ and one another. You are those who have this fellowship. We've seen in the ordinance of prayer, that Christians have a Great High Priest who intercedes for them. You are those who have this Great High Priest.

Now I am speaking specifically to the professing members of Christ's church, to those who have been baptized into the church and have professed their faith in Christ. You specifically are members of Christ's church. And as members, this passage reminds us that we each need to consider our role in the church as a member. We each have been given gifts to use in the church, for its work and for its well being. The fellowship of the saints, as we together exercise the means of grace, is being used by God for our spiritual growth.

But I don't mean to exclude the youth and children in our midst who have been baptized into Christ's church, but have not yet professed their faith publically. You too are members of Christ's church. You too share in the benefits described in this passage for church members. And yet I hope that this passage will show you the importance of church membership and serve to remind you of your obligations as a member. One of those obligations is to profess faith, and I hope and pray that when the time comes you too will be able to profess your faith as well, as part of your duties of being a member in Christ's church.

And so as we look at this passage, let me set for you the context: spiritual gifts. Right before this passage and right after this passage Paul talks about spiritual gifts. He says that God provides various gifts to the members in his church. These gifts differ from one person to another. Some might have a gift of teaching, others a gift of administration, others a gift of helping, and so on. Paul says that we should aspire after the greater gifts, but he also says that each gift has its unique role and purpose in the church.

And yet with all the attention Paul gives to spiritual gifts in this chapter and the following chapters, it seems that Paul was addressing a problem that existed in the Corinthian church. Already at the beginning of this letter Paul acknowledged that there were divisions in the Corinthian church (1:10-11). Now his discussion on spiritual gifts in chapters 12-14 suggests that this had become one area of division. Verse 25 in our passage even exhorts the Corinthians specifically on this issue saying, "there should be no schism (division) in the body." And so it seems that the Corinthians had a problem in this area. From what is described in

our passage, it seems likely that they were perverting the gifts they had been given by God. Some were envious of other people's gifts, and some were arrogantly exalting their gifts over others. Neither behavior is acceptable in Christ's church. Both pervert the intended use of these gifts.

Instead Paul in this passage gives us a picture of biblical church membership. He uses the illustration of the human body to show how we should each be using the gifts God has given us for the benefit of the whole. Paul shows that just as the body has many different parts which are all necessary and important, so too with the church and its many different members. The members of the church have been entrusted with different sorts of gifts, each which are necessary for our well being and growth. So Paul calls the church to unity among diversity. He calls for unity, even among diverse gifts. And as Paul explains this with the illustration of the human body, I hope that this illustration will be especially helpful for us, because I know many in this church have recently experienced first hand what happens when we lose the use of any part of our body. And so hopefully we'll see as well how important each member of the church is.

And so let's look now at this illustration of the human body and see how it calls us to be members who are united as one body in Christ. Describing the body, Paul begins by saying that the body is both one and many. Verse 12 says that the body is one body, but it has many parts. We all know this to be the case; you don't need to go to anatomy class to see that the body has many parts, arms, legs, hands, feet, head, shoulders, eyes, ears, mouth, and so on and so on. And yet these parts, "members" as the NKJV says, all together make up the body. And so the human body is one body made up of many parts.

And so Paul then relates this body illustration to the church and its members. But notice how he does that. He doesn't relate the human body *directly* to the church. Verse 12 says, "For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, *so also is Christ.*" Did you catch that? Verse 12 doesn't say "so also is the church". He says, "so also is Christ. Paul is actually relating this example of the human body to Christ. This example of the body is only applied to us the church in that we are united to Christ. Verse 13 says that we individual Christians have been baptized into the one body of Christ. Verse 27 concludes the example of the body by basically emphasizing the same thing when it says "Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually."

And so this example of the human body and its unity among diversity only applies to us through our relationship to Christ. Christ, like the body, is one. And yet, Christ's body, Paul says, is made up of many members, individual Christians who make up Christ's body, called the church. And so Christ is one, and like the human body, Christ's body is made up of many members. And so our union with Christ, like in so many aspects of our Christian living, is foundational to our membership in the church. Our union with Christ makes us members in Christ's body, the church. It is in this union with Christ that this example of the human body is applied to us. Keep that in mind as we study this illustration of the human body, for it is in Christ where we must ultimately find our unity with other Christians.

And so let's look now at the specific things Paul teaches in this illustration of the human body. We can sum these things up in 3 points: First, Paul teaches that every part is necessary. Second, he says that no part is to be superior. Third, he teaches that each part is connected, sharing together in both honor and suffering.

So first, Paul teaches that every part is necessary. Verse 22 says, "No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary." Calvin

says that the word "weaker" is used in the sense here of "despised". The idea is that those parts of the body that may be seen as of less value are actually indispensable. That's why Paul's hypothetical quotes of body parts bring out the necessity of each part. Paul imagines a sort of conversation between body parts here. This might be something you'd expect to see in a cartoon or in Veggie Tales. Verse 15 says, "If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body was an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole was an ear, where would be the smelling?" Paul says that this kind of talk among the body parts would be ludicrous! It would be irrational for the foot to think it's not part of the body, just because it isn't the hand. Why is the foot any more a part of the body than the hand? Does the hand make someone more human than a foot?

The same is true with the last two quotes. Verse 21 says, "And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." Again, such statements are ridiculous. The eye would always be in need of the hand. The head would always be in need of the feet. If the eye saw something and wanted to pick it up, how could it do that without the hand? If the head willed to go somewhere, how could it do that without the feet? Well, of course the reality is that some people have those sorts of handicaps. Some people find ways to pick things up without hands. Some people find ways to move around without feet. But we call that a handicap. We recognize that this is not ideal. The body ideally functions best with all its parts. The body is not the same without any of them. There is something missing, even when any one part is missing. Every part is integral to the human body.

If you are someone who is handicapped, these verses might come very close to home to you. These words might even be painful as you think about your own handicaps. But I am sure there were plenty of people in Paul's day who were handicapped as well. Surely you help serve as an illustration of what Paul is saying. I know that might make you feel a little uneasy or self-conscious, but the church needs to know this truth. Every body part is important and necessary to the human body. The same is true in the church. Every member of the church is important and necessary. The church is not the same without all its members with their diversity of gifts.

And surely this congregation can understand this point. There are many in our midst that have experienced this first hand. The human body is not the same when parts of our body don't work in the same ways that they used to. When a knee doesn't work as it should, or a shoulder, or a hand, or a foot, or our eyes or ears, or any part; when these things don't work as they did before, we feel the effects right away. As much as these earthly sufferings disrupt your life and limit what you can do, one good thing that can come of them is this. They can show you of the necessity of every member in Christ's body. Every member plays his or her part. Everyone is important. No one's role in the church is to be disregarded, and no one should disregard their own role in the church. Trinity, all the members of this church are vital and important. All the different gifts God has given our members are needed. We are all necessary members in Christ's body.

And so first, Paul teaches that every part is necessary; Now the second thing Paul teaches is that no part is to be superior. Again, Paul makes his point through his hypothetical quotes of the foot, ear, eye and hand. The first two quotes, the quotes by the foot and ear in verses 15-16, both have something in common. They both are looking at other body parts with envy and self-pity. These parts are basically looking at other parts as superior and therefore discounting their own

role. Now look at the other two quotes. The second two quotes, the quotes by the eye and the hand in verse 21, also have something in common. They both arrogantly look down upon other body parts, exalting themselves. These parts are basically looking down at other parts as inferior, and therefore discounting their roles. And yet Paul says that neither of these attitudes is acceptable. Frankly, both of these two perspectives are irrational. Self-pity and envy is irrational because it devalues the important and necessary role that each part has. Arrogance and self-exaltation is irrational because it disregards the necessity of the other parts. Both attitudes would lead to the downfall of the whole body, and its individual parts with it! Consequently, Paul is teaching that no part is ultimately superior to another.

The same is true for the church as well. If every member in Christ's church is necessary, then no one is superior. We can't value some people higher than others because their spiritual gifts seem more attractive and exciting. No, all God's gifts are necessary for the church's health. And so self-pity and envy must be done away with. Arrogance and self-exaltation must be done away with. I think these things can come out in different ways, and we must be on guard against them. One extreme is the "grass is always greener on the other side" mentality. As members, we might compare our gifts with others and become envious. We might look at someone else's gifts and say, "Well, if I had those gifts, then I would be important, but my gifts are insignificant, so I am just going to wallow in self-pity, or wait for everyone else to serve, since my gifts are really not that important anyway." This passage says that that mentality is irrational, illogical, and incorrect!

But the other extreme is pride. The other extreme is comparing our gifts with others and arrogantly saying, "Well, my gifts are so important to the church, that everyone else should follow my lead or get out of my way." This sort of attitude can create a dysfunctional church. It might drive people away from the church who don't have the same gifts as those who domineer in the church. Or it might mean that there becomes certain gifts in the church that are exalted, so that everyone tries to cultivate just those gifts, to the detriment of the other gifts God has given. Why should a foot try to be a hand? Why should an eye try to be an ear? No, that is impossible.

I hope you see how neither of these two extremes is healthy or functional for a church. Paul's example of the human body shows that these attitudes are illogical. That is the same for the church. Don't let some gifts be valued over others. Some jobs and roles in the church may seem more prestigious than others. Even our own value systems can prejudice us. We are a product of our own culture, of our society, of our upbringing, and of so many other factors. Don't let these cloud your judgment in how you see other members and how you see their unique gifts. They will be different than your gifts, but that doesn't mean that they are necessarily better or worse.

Sure, there is a difference between biblical gifts and unbiblical habits and idiosyncrasies. I'm not saying that anything anyone does or tries to do in the church should be welcomed with open arms. The bible tells us about the sorts of gifts that church members should be doing. So the bible must be our guide in evaluating the gifts and service of members. And yet the bible shows that there is a diversity of gifts and a diversity of different types of people. We may not be too diverse currently as a church, but Lord willing, as we continue to grow, we must remember that we'll be bringing people into our midst that are different than us and will have complementary gifts. We must encourage their gifts and service according to the biblical pattern, and not according to our own sinful prejudices.

And so that's the second thing Paul teaches; that no part is to be superior. The third thing Paul teaches is that each part is connected, sharing together in both honor and suffering. To make his point, Paul appeals to how we dress the human body as an example to show how in the church we are all connected and share together in one outcome. He shows that when we dress the body, we account for certain body parts differently, because we know that our appearance is judged as a whole. In verse 23 Paul says, "And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor." This word for "honorable" has to do with appearance in this context. And the language of "bestowing" is language used for clothing or dressing, so its talking about clothing the body with greater honor. Basically it's saying that the parts of our body which we don't like as well, we dress them up. We all know this to be the case. If there are parts of our body which we don't like as much, we try to compensate for this with our clothing. That may seem a bit shallow of a statement, but the reality is that most people do this, and so I think Paul is making a very relevant and understandable illustration. The cable TV show "What Not To Wear" is a show about how to do this in style; about what sorts of styles, cuts, and types of clothing emphasize a person's more attractive physical features, and hide or minimize the less attractive features.

Paul continues this example in verse 23 saying, "and our unrepresentable parts have greater modesty, but our presentable parts have no need." Here Paul says that we account for our unrepresentable parts by dressing modestly. You may have guessed that "unrepresentable parts" refers to what we might call our "private parts". That does seem to be what the Greek suggests. And so, again, this is something we understand. Part of having a proper appearance, especially as a Christian, is modesty. That requires appropriately covering certain parts of our body in ways that are not required for other parts of our body.

The meaning of these illustrations of how we dress is clarified in verse 26, when Paul says, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together." This verse connects these illustrations on how we dress with the members in the church. He says that the members of the church are all connected together. When one hurts, we all hurt; when one is blessed, we are all blessed. The examples of how we as humans dress ourselves, covering our private parts, and dressing in a way to emphasize our good qualities, show that when we dress, we account for every part. We dress ourselves, taking into consideration each and every part of our bodies. Those parts that may seem less attractive or less presentable, we take extra special care with them. They in a sense receive more attention and care because of their apparent weaknesses in how they are outwardly perceived. We do this because our appearance is judged as a whole. How we dress every part of our bodies affects our whole appearance. The same is true with the church and each of its members - we all share together. When one hurts, we all hurt. When one is blessed, we all are blessed.

And so what may at first seem a sort of shallow example by Paul, the outward dressing of the body, really brings out the underlying truth about what Paul is describing. When Paul talks about how we outwardly dress and adorn our bodies, we do this because the outward appearance of certain parts may not seem as presentable or attractive. And yet, we do not normally just cut those body parts off. We recognize that we need each of our parts. If we have a unsightly scar on our hand, we don't cut our hand off, because we need it. We might wear gloves to cover the scar, but we certainly wouldn't cut our hand off because of it. The same is true with members in our church. Some members and their gifts may not seem as "attractive" or "presentable" compared to others. They and their gifts may not seem as important or as prestigious from an outward perspective. But ultimately we are told that each and every member and their God-given gifts are necessary. We

are all connected. Just as one body part affects both the appearance and function of the whole body, so every member contributes to the health of the church. Like the appearance of a human body, we as a church are only as strong as our weakest link.

And so Paul's example of how we care and dress the body should influence how we treat one another. We need to be fully aware that we as a church share together. When one member of our church is hurting, all of us are affected. When one member of our church is honored, we are all lifted up. And so let us look to nurture and encourage one another. The care that each of us takes in treating our own bodies should influence how we treat others in the church. If we try to dress each of the parts of our own body with beauty and modesty, how much more should we seek to nurture and honor our fellow members in the church? If as we dress we give special attention to our less attractive parts, how much more should we seek to encourage and strengthen those members who may be perceived as being of less worth? So who is weak among us? Let us look to strengthen them! Who is less honored among us? Let us look to honor them all the more!

And so these three things Paul has described about human bodies must influence how we see our brothers and sisters in the church. Every member is necessary. No member is to be superior to another. Each member is connected together, sharing in both honor and suffering together. And be encouraged. As Paul has talked about the body in this passage, he has brought this all back to God. Paul has made clear that the body, with all its parts, has been designed by God. Verse 18 says that God has set each of the body parts in the body, just as it pleased him. Verse 24 says that God organized the body in such a way so that greater honor would be given to the part that lacked it. And so everything Paul has been talking about concerning the way the body is put together and organized, with some parts seeming outwardly more attractive or presentable than others, is all part of God's plan. It's all part of God's plan that each part would recognize that it belongs to the whole and so serve the good of the whole. It's all part of God's plan that the body would in this way care for each and every part of the body. How much more is this the case with Christ's body the church? How much more is the church the work of God's loving and wise creation. How much more has he ordered it marvelously in a way that would call us all to be caring for one another?

God has ordered the church according to his wisdom. Again, this is why Paul brackets this passage in 1 Corinthians 12 with a discussion on spiritual gifts. God gives various gifts to the church to realize his plan for how he has organized the church. And these spiritual gifts are an expression of his grace. They are a way in which he blesses us and nurtures us. Through these spiritual gifts God sees his plan for the health and wellbeing of the church realized. Through the work of each of the members caring for one another, the church, with every member, is kept healthy. And of course, this especially happens through the church members utilizing and participating in the means of grace that have been given to the church.

And so saints of God, we are members of one body. We are the body of Christ, and members individually. Our individual union with Christ is our foundation for our union, and even our unity, with one another. We must not be divided. We cannot have schism in our church and be healthy. We must do away with any favoritism or looking down upon anyone. You must not be puffed up by pride in your own gifts, thinking of them as superior to others. Neither can you look down upon yourself thinking of your gifts as inferior to others. No, we are one body, and so the church is rightly called an "organism". Each of us must be spiritually healthy and doing our part for our church to be healthy. And we must be caring for each of our members in order for us to be healthy as a church.

As we think about this task, we will recognize that it won't be easy. As we hear of this example of the human body I'm sure we can all realize the difficulty of this task. Paul's own examples of how we care for our physical bodies, remind us of our own shortcomings in how we care for our own bodies. We often have the desire to take good care of our bodies, but don't have the follow through. That's why New Year's Resolutions often have to do with getting in shape or eating better, and yet these resolutions often last for just a few short weeks. And so if we realize that we can't be faithful to take care of our own physical bodies, how much more will we struggle to be faithful to take care of the spiritual body, the church, which we belong to? Surely the same sin that keeps us from being good stewards of our physical bodies will also hinder us from taking care of our church body. Yes, this will be the case. We will struggle with sin, both our own and others. We should loathe this sin, we should confess and repent from it, and strive against it. But, may we also be encouraged. May we be encouraged that the church, like the human body is God's design and plan. He is gifting the church. He is watching over it. And he has given us the means of grace that we can continue to grow. And so we will indeed stumble and fall as a church, but may we keep getting back up, trusting in the Lord and his work in our midst, that he is faithful to his promise to not only be the author of our faith, but also the perfecter of our faith.

And so as we apply these truths to our ministry here at Trinity, I'd like you to think about yourself and your role in the church as a member. This passage should tell you that you need to use your gifts here at Trinity. You are a necessary and indispensable part of our church body. Don't let others, and yourself, become stunted in their growth because you disregard the gifts God has given you for building up the church. Idleness in the church is not an option for members. We as a church need everyone's gifts. Don't wait for someone else to do what you yourself can do. So, you are being called to action and service. This of course means that you need to reflect on what your gifts are. Maybe some of you are not content with what your gifts are, but this passage has told you to see your important role in the church. Right now as a small church, I know that many of you are already doing so very much to serve in this church, and have had to pick up various jobs while you've been without a pastor. As we grow, don't let that stop. Set an example for new members, and let's find ways for new members to use their gifts as well.

And so thinking about others, that means we should be encouraging each other. Point to their gifts. If you have appreciated someone's service, say, "Hey, you do that really well - don't stop!" We should be positively encouraging one another's gifts instead of being critical or complaining. We should encourage each other to care for one another, not in order to try to flatter or puff up that person, but as a way to recognize the gifts God has given them and to seek to cultivate and strengthen those gifts in one another. We need those gifts for our well being, and so we should do everything we can to care for and nurture one another.

So, in closing, I'd like to end with a final encouragement as we seek to live this out in the life of our church. We are talking about Christ's body. This example of the human body, and of God's great plan and care for it, only reminds us all the more of God's even greater care for Christ's body. Our human bodies as we know them will pass away, being replaced with glorified bodies. But the body of Christ will never pass away. Instead, even now the body of Christ is being adorned and prepared for the great marriage supper of the Lamb described in Revelation 19. On that day, the body of Christ, all the saints, will be presented as a beautiful bride adorned for Christ. We are that body and that bride. Christ will surely

prepare us, even in part through the fellowship of the saints, for that great day.
May we serve here in Trinity to that end, trusting in Christ's work among us, amen.

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