

A Way to Serve

The Point: God has empowered and equipped us to serve His church.

Session Passage: 1 Corinthians 12:12-24

1 Corinthians 12:12-13

Connection to the Point: Believers comprise one body in Christ.

Context. Paul followed his discussion of Christian liberty (chap. 10) with instructions about head coverings and the Lord's Supper (chap. 11). At first glance, those two subjects may seem dissimilar. However, the context of both discussions is the role of order in the life of the local church. Moving into chapter 12, the immediate context of this focal passage is a discussion of spiritual gifts which covers the next three chapters (chaps. 12–14). Once again, the larger context is the life of the local church and specifically the role of order. The issue of spiritual gifts is not merely a contemporary phenomenon. Paul and other New Testament writers wrote on the role of spiritual gifts in the life of the church from the very beginning. The specific issue in the Corinthian church was that some spiritual gifts were being elevated to a higher status than others. The Holy Spirit distributes a diversity of gifts to the body of Christ as He sees fit for the body's common benefit.

Many parts (v. 12). The concept of membership has taken on a completely different meaning in today's culture in the United States. People speak about being members of a gym or a country club or some other volunteer organization. However, when the Bible speaks about membership concerning the local church, the image is that of a human body with all of its parts. Parts of a body do not volunteer to be members of a body. They are parts of their respective body by their very nature. An individual body has many different kinds of body parts, and each of these parts plays a vital role in the body's life.

So also is Christ (v. 12). Paul explicitly connected the image of a human body to the body of Christ—the church. We cannot be certain why Paul used the image of a human body to discuss the life of the local church. Perhaps Paul was thinking about Jesus's words to him on the road to Damascus, when Jesus told Paul that his persecution of the church was actually the persecution of Him (Acts 9:1-5). At any rate, Paul used the imagery of a human body to express the truth that all Christians are parts of Christ's body, the church.

Baptized (v. 13). Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the two ordinances Jesus gave to the church. While individual believers participate in the Lord's Supper many times throughout their lives, believers are baptized only once as a public profession of their faith. The Lord's Supper reinforces a member's status as a member of the body of Christ. Baptism symbolizes a new believer's new life in Christ as well as entrance into the life of the local church and into the body of Christ.

Paul connected baptism with the discussion of spiritual gifts by saying that all believers are baptized "by one Spirit." A believer need not pursue the baptism by the Holy Spirit after conversion. Instead, being baptized by the Spirit is synonymous with and occurs at the moment of every believer's conversion. The work of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection secured the salvation of all believers. The indwelling Holy Spirit applies the work of Jesus to the life of the believer. Water baptism is an external sign of that internal reality. By being immersed in water, the new believer is professing that he has died to himself and has been raised to walk in new life which is in the Spirit (Rom. 6:4).

One body (v. 13). This image ties back to Paul's earlier denouncement of the rival factions that had developed in the Corinthian church. Believers had formed groups in which they claimed to follow Paul, Apollos, Peter, or

even Jesus. Paul continued to refute that way of thinking here by saying that believers form one body and therefore should not think of themselves as being divided into different factions or groups.

Whether Jews or Greeks (v. 13). Earlier in this letter, Paul had indicated that ethnic and social identities played a role in how he approached Jews and Gentiles in his mission to win both groups to Christ (9:19-23). However, such distinctions are meaningless in the body of Christ, since all have been “baptized into Christ” (Gal. 3:27). “There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus” (v. 28).

One Spirit to drink (v. 13). One of the reasons that believers are not divided into different groups is because they have all drunk from the same Spirit. This phrase is probably not referring to the Lord’s Supper. Instead, it is related to the baptism of the Spirit that occurs at conversion—the image of being drenched and immersed in the Spirit through conversion to Christ.

1 Corinthians 12:14-18

Connection to the Point: God has given every believer a specific role and responsibility in the body of Christ.

The body is not one part but many (v. 14). In the last several years, computer scientists and engineers have made remarkable advances in robotics and artificial intelligence. However, despite what popular culture presents in movies and novels, scientists and engineers remain entirely unable to create any kind of artificial machine that comes close to resembling the human body. One aspect of the human body that makes it so incredibly difficult to replicate is its extraordinarily complex diversity. Additionally, the human brain has a remarkable ability to coordinate all that diversity to accomplish incredibly precise tasks. While Paul had no understanding of microbiology and a limited understanding of anatomy and physiology, he did understand that the human body is both extremely complex and exceedingly diverse.

I don’t belong to the body (v. 15). Apparently, some of the church members in Corinth felt that they were worthless in that church, in their eyes contributing little to the church by their gifts, and therefore were not truly a part of that church. Even in churches today, some individual church members may feel less valued because they do not possess the exact same skills, experiences, or education as other church members. For instance, a humble older woman in a church whose skills lie in the areas of helps and service might compare herself to a young man who is a gifted Bible teacher and conclude that because she is not a gifted teacher that she does not truly belong to the church. Paul repudiated such improper thinking. Every part of the human body is vital for the body to continue to functioning properly and performing all its daily tasks, such as walking, talking, eating, and drinking. Likewise, every individual person God has put in a local church is integral to the proper functioning of that church. There are no accidental or incidental church members, and there is no such thing as a church member who does not belong to the body of Christ.

Foot . . . ear . . . whole body were an eye (vv. 15-17). The various parts of the human body are necessary for the proper functioning of the whole. A body made up of only eyes would not only look like something out of a science fiction movie, but also would not function properly. In fact, in real life, that kind of body would simply not survive. Similarly, the various members of a local church have been providentially given different gifts, passions, abilities, and endowed with diverse experiences and personalities. Comparing and contrasting themselves to others in the church is fruitless and counterproductive. Likewise, all the various members of a local body should not attempt to perform the same function. Members of a local church should carry out the varied functions God has providentially equipped each one to perform. When those members utilize their gifts and abilities, leverage their experiences and personalities, and fulfill the passions of their hearts in Christ, their local church will be healthy and function properly within its given context, bringing glory to God.

Where would the hearing be . . . where would the sense of smell be? (v. 17). The human body has different senses—sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste—and each plays a role in the overall function of the body. Similarly, a church with only certain spiritual gifts would be unable to function properly and to carry out the mission of the church.

God has arranged each one . . . just as he wanted (v. 18). Divine sovereignty and human responsibility are not incompatible. In fact, they are held in tension throughout the Bible. In his letters, Paul clearly taught both that God is sovereign over all things and that individuals are responsible for their respective actions. This phrase is the climax to much of Paul's argument in his letter to the Corinthian church up to this point. In the opening chapters of the letter, Paul taught God was sovereign over the growth of the local church in Corinth and that individuals like he and Apollos were tools that God providentially used for His sovereign, perfect, and kind purposes (1 Cor 3:6-7). In this passage, Paul taught that God's sovereignty extends to the believers who make up the local church. At the same time, believers are responsible for the proper exercise of their gifts in the service of God and His church.

1 Corinthians 12:19-24

Connection to the Point: God has made every believer a necessary part of the body of Christ.

All the same part (v. 19). A body made up of only one type of member or part would not actually be a body. By definition, a human body is diverse and is not made up of many of the same part. Paul expounded upon this biological reality and applied it to the local church. Diversity is not opposed to unity, especially in the local church. In fact, diversity is vital to a properly functioning healthy church, and a properly functioning church is united in Christ.

Many parts, but one body (v. 20). Human bodies are made up of many different parts—many different members. The hands wash and clean other parts of the body. Eyes look out for danger and thereby protect the entire body. The mouth consumes food which is essential for the rest of the body to survive. Taken together, different parts of the human body serve and provide for other parts of the body. Similar to a human body, a local church body is made up of many different individual Christians with diverse gifts, passions, abilities, experiences, and personalities. These individuals, distinct Christians, however, do not exist for themselves. Instead, they exist to serve one another in the church body.

I don't need you! (v. 21). In the previous verses, Paul addressed those members of the local church who did not view themselves as worthy of being a part of the body of Christ. In this verse, Paul addressed others in the church who saw themselves as being superior to other members of the body. The apostle might have had in mind those members whose gifts were public and attention-getting, which led to a false sense of superiority. Paul condemned this kind of thinking. Only supreme arrogance would lead an individual believer to tell another believer that he or she is unnecessary.

Those parts of the body that are weaker are indispensable (v. 22). The human body has many delicate parts that are also crucial to its functioning in a healthy manner. For example, ears are essential to the sense of hearing, which in turn, is fundamental to a healthy and functioning body. However, human ears are both exposed to the elements and susceptible to being damaged. Likewise, eyes are essential to the sense of sight and important to leading a healthy life. Just as the ears are easily damaged and exposed to the elements of nature, the eyes are equally delicate and exposed. Other body parts, such as the soles of the feet and the palms of the hands, are also sensitive and relatively weak yet indispensable to a healthy and functioning body. Paul extended this idea to the local church by teaching that certain believers in the local church who might seem weak are truly vital to the healthy functioning of the local church.

[Those] less honorable, we clothe these with greater honor (v. 23). The context of this comment is the cultural concepts of honor and shame. Exposing certain body parts would have been considered shameful. Meanwhile other body parts, which are honorable, may be exposed to the public. By referring to “less honorable” body parts, Paul was most likely referring to the sexual organs. Sexual organs being treated with “greater honor” means something like greater or special modesty. They are covered and, therefore, out of public view.

Our unrespectable parts are treated with greater respect (v. 23). This is probably another way of referring to human sexual organs. Sexual organs are not publicly displayed but are covered by clothing. By covering them with clothing, humans are showing their sexual organs respect. Financially poor individuals in the local church in Corinth might have been considered unrespectable by some in the church. Earlier in the letter, during his criticism of how the church was practicing the Lord’s Supper, Paul rebuked the church in Corinth for not treating the poor with respect (11:17-26). Paul’s teaching in these focal verses seems to be encouraging the Corinthians to treat them with even greater respect than they treated others in the church.

God has put the body together (v. 24). Paul repeated an idea he expressed a few verses earlier when he wrote, “God has arranged each one of the parts in the body just as he wanted” (v. 18). In both verses, Paul was emphasizing that ultimately the body of Christ is not something local churches create. God Himself is the one who puts churches together, and He desires that there be no division in those churches. He is sovereign over the formation of both the universal church (made up to all Christians in every time and place) and every local church that has ever existed or ever will exist. This theological idea is not a mere abstraction. Instead, this truth provides rest and assurance—God is in control.