



## **1 Corinthians 12:12-27**

### **“ORGANIC CHURCH”**

(Sermon Plus Study And Application Questions)

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**“Following Christ From City Center!”**

## **I. 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 (RSV)**

(As the text appears in your modern Bibles)

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body -- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free -- and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single organ, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. 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." On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

## **II. SCRIPTURE SHEET AND SERMON**

(As heard by ancient hearers)

I CORINTHIANS 12:12-27 "ORGANIC CHURCH"

Issue = *The One & The Many, Builds On 12:7*

4 KEY TERMS 1) v.12 THE CONTROLLING METAPHOR: HUMAN BODY (MANY/ONE), SO CHRIST. Rom. 12:4-5

12 For even as the BODY / One Body v.12a = Analogy, Classic Topos On Political Unity
has many MEMBERS / Many Members Philo, Ancient Laws 3.131; Plato Republic 5:10
and all the MEMBERS of the body being many/ Many Members Livy, History Of Rome 2.32 (Class Envy)
are ONE body, One Body //1:13, Ancient Fable Of Body/Limbs
Organic, Living Unity Of Christian Community
so it is with the CHRIST (the Messiah). Surprise! v.12b = Analogy Applied (Individual & His Community// Israel), 15:22
The Church Is Like A Body, Messianic People: //3:5-9, 3:9-15

2) vv.13-14 ENTERING THE ONE BODY: BY BAPTISM AND THE SPIRIT, DIVERSITY.

13 a1 For in (by/with) one Spirit "For" v.13 = Unity: The Spirit Constitutes A New Identity
One 2 we all into one body were baptized Common Past, Baptism In Spirit: Lk. 3:16, Jn. 1:33, Acts 1:5, 11:16
whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free, Ancient Social Divisions, Gal. 3:28, External Image
1' and we all of one Spirit New Reality, Social Divisions Cancelled, Fluid Image, Jn. 4:10
2' were made to drink (lit. "were saturated in"). 10:1-4, Drenched, Internal Image, Jn. 7:37-39, 4:14
External (Water), Internal (Drink), Passive Voice, i.e. By God
14 b For the body does not consist of one member but of many. "For" v.14 = Diversity Described
Many What Divides The World Should Not Divide Church

3) vv.15-21 DIVERSITY AND MUTUALITY IN THE ONE BODY. //Votive Offerings At Asclepion: Disconnected Body Parts

a) vv.15-16 Body Parts Speak: Issue Of Perceived Inferiority Addressed.

15 (Insanity) If the foot (Gk. = pous) should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,"
that would not make it any less a part of the body. Self-Pity Is Error, No Envy
16 If the ear (Gk. = ous) should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,"
that would not make it any less a part of the body. Unity: Body Needs All Part/Gifts
Difference Is Not Inferiority, No Independence

b) vv.17-18 Two Absurd Questions: Emphasis On Loss Of Diversity.

17 If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? Named Organs, Freakish
If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? Real Loss
Arranged = God's Own Purpose
18 But as it is,
God has arranged the organs in the body, each as he chose. Not Nature
Placement/Gifting Is God's Business

b') vv.19-20 Absurd Question Recast: Emphasis On Loss Of The Whole.

19 If all were a single organ, where would the body be? Generic Category
Distorted View Of Gifts Destroys Unity
20 As it is,
there are many parts, yet one body. Diversity/Unity Are From God
Church Is A Diverse, Organic Reality

a') v.21 Body Parts Speak: Issue Of Perceived Superiority Addressed.

21 (Insanity) The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," Cruel Barb, Destructive Claim
nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." Isolation (Pride/Autonomy) Is A Monstrous Sin
Eye/Head Are Leaders, Hand/Feet Are Laborers

2') vv.22-25 LIVING IN THE DIVERSE BODY: HONOR AND CARE FOR ONE ANOTHER.

22 b' On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, Less Gifted Are Essential
23 and those parts of the body we think less honorable we invest with greater honor. Honor/Shame Culture
24 And our unrepresentable parts (i.e. private parts) are treated with greater modesty Valuable, Not For Display
which our more presentable parts do not require. Paul's Concern = Non-Hierarchy Of Gifts
References To Wealth/Status In Church
25 a' But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the inferior part, Honor From God //7:22
that there may be no discord (schism) in the body, No Schism On Wealth/Status, 1:10, 11:18
One but that all the members may have the same care (lit. anxiety) for one another. Not Leveling But Love
In Gifts: Diversity Needed/ Unity Guarded/ Division Avoided

1') vv.26-27 THE CONTROLLING METAPHOR: BODY, CHRIST, MEMBERS. Unity In Life

26 If ONE MEMBER suffers, all suffer together. Not Ought, But Is (Ontology): 2 Cor. 11:29
IF ONE member is honored, all rejoice together. Our Lives Are Deeply Connected, No Absolute Privacy
//Plato's Republic 5.10.462(Slaves Excluded)
27 Now you are the BODY OF CHRIST, and individually MEMBERS of it. Theological Fact, 1 Clem. 37

## ORGANIC CHURCH

*“If one member suffers, all suffer together.  
If one member is honored, all rejoice together.”*

We are connected at a depth we do not understand.

### I C O R I N T H I A N S 1 2 : 1 9

**B**ecause of the combination of technology and isolation, you should expect more stories like the one that ran in Canada’s *MacLean’s* magazine in November 2004. The headline is “A High-Tech Ghost Story,” and it reads like an episode of *CSI*:

“One November day in 2002, Jim Sulkers- a 53-year-old retired municipal worker from Winnipeg, Manitoba, climbed into bed... and died.... On August 25, 2004, police who had been called by concerned relatives (a little late, I might add!) entered his apartment and found his body in a mummified state. Everything else in his tidy one-bedroom apartment was intact, although the food in the fridge was spoiled and his wall calendar two years out of date.

Mr. Sulkers was reclusive, estranged from family, and had a medical condition that prevented his body from decomposing. Automatic banking deposited his pension and withdrew utilities and expenses as they came due. ‘For many practical purposes, this man was virtually alive throughout that time. His life was extended for two years by the technology he used...’<sup>1</sup>

Around the edges of our modern world are more and more Jim Sulkers. From time to time they show up in my office, perhaps because they remember the church as a place of hope. And when- after a few minutes of conversation- I assess their support system, I often don’t find much there. I ask things like, If you were in the hospital, who’d visit? How often do you eat alone? Or the really tough one, If you died today, who’d bury you? Do you have a church and a pastor? Where is your family? Their trampoline simply doesn’t have enough springs around the edges to keep them bouncing back when life pushes them down. Insulated and isolated, whether by choice or mental illness or health issues or addictions or

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<sup>1</sup> Edited from PreachingToday.com search under 1 Corinthians 12.

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broken families or whatever. As I listen, the echo of an old Beatle’s song sounds in my head:

“All the lonely people, where do they all come from?  
All the lonely people, where do they all belong?  
Eleanor Rigby, died in a church and was buried along with her name.  
Nobody came....”

There are, demographically speaking, less marrieds and more singles out there. And many more so-called believers who have never found belonging in a local church. A wave of privacy concerns characterize our lives. Individualism- the idea that I can and must make it all on my own- is choking off connections. More and more say *me first*; fewer and fewer say *we first*. Visions of *the common good* seem to be decreasing at every level. The American ideal has become get rich, isolate yourself behind gates and guards, fill life with pleasures and diversions, venture out for shopping, and above all, stay away from the poor and others with obvious needs. People with resources pay a hundred or more an hour for someone to listen with skill and care; we call it therapy! Except in severe situations, it’s what you’re supposed to get from family and Christian friends.<sup>2</sup>

We- the church of Jesus Christ- are, by God’s design *the relationship place*, a place to connect with God and the people who’ve been gathering in God’s name for a very long time. At our best we are a hospital for the cure of isolation and meaninglessness; at our worst just one more activity to check off your duty list before rushing off to the next thing.

Here’s what I recommend. Come to worship; ask questions; discover the love of Christ for you, then through you to others; find a place of believing and belonging; buy stock by putting some bucks in the plate; discover your spiritual gifts; receive communion; have a conversation with Pastor Phil; take a class; join the choir; get over pride and turn in a prayer card; receive prayer for healing, let the Holy Spirit infect you and find out that your life matters! People need the Lord, and they need a local church, and I don’t particularly care in what order they discover them because you cannot lead anything that resembles a Christian life without both firmly in place. We have a Savior, and we are a social religion by his design. Get either of these wrong, and the whole thing is distorted. Yes, you can have a deeply personal relationship with Jesus, just not a private one. Jesus doesn’t allow such perversions. His prayer begins, “*Our Father*,” and after that all the pronouns are plural. Not

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<sup>2</sup> For an in-depth analysis of our cultural situation and the need for primary communities that build social capital within groups (*bonding capital*) and between differing groups (*bridging capital*), see Theresa F. Latini, *The Church And The Crisis Of Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), especially Chapter 1, “The Crisis Of Community,” 11-29, based on the sociological work of Anthony Giddens.

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a single *I* in the Lord’s Prayer, only *us* and *our*. J.B. Priestly wrote:

“We don’t live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish.”<sup>3</sup>

**Turning To The Text**

If you are a Christian, meaning if you have basic trust in Jesus Christ and have been welcomed through baptism into his people, you are a living part of a reality the Bible labels *the body of Christ*.<sup>4</sup> It has organization and institutional expression, but it is first a living organism in which the whole is more than the sum of the parts and in which synergy is the rule. One plus one is always three or more, because Jesus promised that wherever two or three are gathered in his name, there he will be as well.<sup>5</sup> We are connected to one another in and through Jesus Christ who moves and acts throughout his world-wide body much as blood moves through veins and arteries nourishing every cell.

Every Christian now living- or who has ever lived, is part of this divine network- *the body of Christ*. It’s what we confess in the Apostles’ Creed as *the communion of the saints*. In a real sense you have more in common with a Christian who died and went to heaven in the fifth century than with a close family member who does not know Jesus as Lord and therefore has not been incorporated into this mysterious, mystical, only partly visible to us, living reality known as *the body of Christ*. It is not to our bio-families that eternal life is given but the church as the web of all who receive new life in Jesus Christ.

Despite all the fractures we now observe between the churches, we are- if truth be seen and the veil parted, one body in Christ.<sup>6</sup> His life to and through us binds us together. All Christians– in whatever land, at whatever time– draw life from Christ, or else they do not

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<sup>3</sup> PreachingToday.com search under 1 Corinthians 12:2-27.

<sup>4</sup> For a recent pastoral treatment of the *body of Christ* by U.M clergy, see Andy and Sally Langford, *Living As United Methodist Christians* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2011), Chapter 2, “What Do We Share With Other Christians,” 27-40.

<sup>5</sup> While the primary setting of Matthew 18:19-20 is the setting of community discipline, in popular usage it has taken on the force of a general promise.

<sup>6</sup> The third article of the Nicene Creed includes material on ecclesiology (the identity and function of the church), “We believe in *one*, holy, catholic, and apostolic church....” Unity is thus one of the four classic creedal marks of the church.

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have it. If there is life in our midst, it is *from him*. Every Christian is family to me, which is why I love and embrace the whole church.<sup>7</sup> The risen flesh of Jesus is seated at the Father’s right hand, but because he has been freed by resurrection from the limits of space and time his presence extends through his Spirit to wherever there are Christians. And if the boggles your mind, it should. It is a deep mystery of faith. There is a web of divine life that connects all believers to one another in the body of Christ and through the body to the Lord.

Because we each *have a body*, or better still *are a body*, we all understand how it works. I am many parts but one body. My eyeball does not resemble my finger, but they are parts of the same body. Some parts are visible, others invisible. Some I display without a thought; others are covered out of modesty. But all work together to keep me going.

If you want to understand how the church works, close the door of your bathroom and dance naked in front of a mirror. Then take a minute for all the parts to stop moving- and for some of us that will take longer than others! then ask, How is the church like what I have witnessed? And if you say *terribly out of shape* or *not what it used to be*, that’s the wrong answer. I’m not being crude; I’m only commenting on what the Apostle Paul taught about our national motto, *E Pluribus Unum*, “out of many- one.” The diversity of parts is not the cause of division but precisely for the sake of a higher unity and effectiveness. And if any part of my body is missing or hurting, the rest of the body knows about it and rushes to its aid with healing resources. We are the body of Christ. The diversity of our function is the key to the unity of our purpose, which is to be the extensions of the risen Lord.

At this point we need to make a distinction. It’s the grammatical difference between the indicative mood- meaning *what is*, and the imperative - meaning what *ought to be*. Paul does not say that we *ought to be* the body of Christ, as if it were a moral obligation that depended on our performance for its truth. It’s like telling someone *they ought to be a Christian* when they, in fact, are not one. They can’t because they aren’t. But if the life of Jesus is in them, it makes sense to offer ideas as to how their behavior can be altered to match their new and deepest identity. It’s not *act like a Christian so that you can become one* but *act like one because you already are one*. And I am telling you, Main Streeters, you

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<sup>7</sup> A mark of American Methodist culture is our *ecumenical spirit*, meaning our impulse to find common ground with other Christians and to do good works cross-denominationally. This is grounded in the vision of our founder John Wesley, particularly in his doctrinal sermon *Catholic Spirit* (online at [wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-39-catholic-spirit](http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-39-catholic-spirit)). The best synthesis of Wesley’s catholic vision is found in Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley’s Teachings, Volume 1: God And Providence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 121-130, under the heading *C: The Catholic Spirit*.

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are already, ontologically-- meaning as real as can be-- *the body of Christ*. It's not about making ourselves what we are not but of becoming more deeply and more visibly what God has already made us by his grace, which is living extensions of his blessed Son.

Today around the world, the risen Jesus is expressing himself through his one body in all locations. Miracles are happening now. New cells are grafted into the body through faith and baptism. Spiritual gifts are flowing as packets of divine energy throughout the body. The immune system is taking on spiritual intruders and erroneous teaching- the viruses and cancers which weaken the body. Some cells are migrating from the church visible on earth to the church invisible in heaven within the same body. At this moment we are part of what God is doing in the earth through the multi-dimensional body of Christ. The Holy Spirit is at work to make us more truly who we already are and to realize our identity in public. And if you are not aware of such, it demonstrates how little you understand your deep identity as a Christian. You are part of something big and vast and ancient and incredibly enduring, one of the only two things God is committed to in an unqualified way: 1) God will heal and restore creation, and 2) God will have a people!

I am telling you who Jesus Christ says you are, and he says that you are a living part of his risen body, and that what life you have now and later is dependent on that location. Your spiritual gifts and specific location are clues to your function. You are not who you are and where you are by accident. We are not a business but a body, not an organization so much as an organism, not in competition with one another but in cooperation with our living head. Every of us is vital to what God wants to do; no one is redundant. On this team, everyone plays.<sup>8</sup> Being faithful means more than *come, sit, pray, pay, and obey*. It means you get part of the action, what Jesus is up to locally.

Now with this in mind, we can make sense of Paul's thoughts as they circle over one another in a grand spiral of insight. I want to approach our text through a series of questions, the first being: **How do we work, and who are we?** the answer to which is verse 12, "For even as the body has many members, and all the members of the body being many are one body, so it is with Christ." The church, therefore, is like a human body; it's Christ's body.

Diverse as we are, we are all linked with Jesus and with one another. What life comes to each comes through the body of Christ, which is why, particularly in our hyper-individualistic cultural context, God will not allow us to pursue spiritual independence. If you think something will make you more self-sufficient as a Christian, then I tell you, it is not from God. What God is after is not solo superstars and independent operators but those

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<sup>8</sup> See John Wimber, *Everyone Gets To Play* (Boise, ID: Ampelon, 2008) for a great treatment of spiritual gifts and life in the body of Christ.

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who are humbly dependent on others even as they make their unique contributions. After much frustration, a wise Christian once wrote:

“Alone I cannot serve the Lord effectively, and he will spare no pains to teach me this. He will bring things to an end, allowing doors to close and leaving me ineffectively knocking my head against a wall until I realize that I need the help of the Body as well as of the Lord.”<sup>9</sup>

Second question: **How do people enter this new thing, this living body of Christ?** Answer, “Only God can do it.” And how does God do it? Answer, “By the external and internal work of the Holy Spirit.” In verse 13 Paul balances an external image- baptism, with an internal image- drinking. Both rest on the metaphor of the Spirit being compared to water which can be poured. Being joined to the body of Christ is a totalizing experience, meaning no part of you is left unaffected. The Holy Spirit is a new external environment into which we are plunged or baptized; it’s also a new internal reality which we drink. Verse 13 has two parts, “For in one Spirit we *all* into one body were baptized (the external image), and we *all* of one Spirit were made to drink” (the internal image). This is not just for some but for *all*, as Paul says twice. If you jump in a pool and drink some of the water you have the image. What is around you as a new environment is now also within you.

You may not understand your new spiritual surroundings; you may not appreciate the One who is within you, but that does not change the facts. Even your faith does not make it happen; faith in Christ is the human assent and trust God rightly asks for the Holy Spirit to then graft you into the body of Christ and to give you a new external and internal environment. To become aware of this is to be illumined and invigorated. Spiritual life become pressing and dominant because you have been awakened to what was true all along. It’s like finding buried treasure in your back yard.

Third question: **What is the benefit?** Now because it is a work of the Holy Spirit, we are put in just the right place and given the right gifts to match our calling and mission. Discovering whose you are and who you are in the body of Christ is an ongoing process. Accepting how God made you and what God made you for is the real path to fulfillment and integration. Be who you are with the gifts God has given. At the gate of heaven God will not ask me, Why weren’t you Billy Graham? but, Why weren’t you the one and only Phil Thraikill? In this deal everyone matters, and there are no copies or clones.

Have any of you seen the children’s movie *Ice Age*? There’s a scene about an hour into the film when a pack of saber-tooth tigers attack a tribe of nomads. A mother and her

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<sup>9</sup> A quote from Watchman Nee.

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baby try to outrun the predators but are cornered at a waterfall. With no other option, the mother jumps, securely cradling her infant. Her wound from the fall is mortal; she survives only long enough to deposit her newborn on the riverbank. The little boy is discovered by a wooly mammoth named Manfred, a sloth name Sid, and a saber-tooth tiger named Diego. These unlikely companions unite on a mission to return the baby to its father.

As they trek through the terrain of ice and snow carrying the infant, they realize they're on an erupting volcano. Heat melts the glacier bridges atop the ice fields, separating Diego; he jumps to reach the others but falls short. Dangling from the edge, his grip falters, and he falls. Manfred leaps in after him and tosses the tiger upwards to safety.

Diego is moved by Manfred's compassion and courage. "Why did you do that?" he asks. "You could have died trying to save me."

"That's what you do when you're part of a herd. You look after each other."

Amazed at the circumstances that brought the three together, Sid muses, "I don't know about you guys, *but we are one strange herd.*"<sup>10</sup>

The church is a strange herd of unlikely companions learning to watch out for one another and live the new reality. Sometimes it seems as if all we have in common is our faith in Jesus Christ, and in that we are right. The challenge is to let this truth be more central than any of the other criteria that divide people, and in Paul's world that meant whether you were Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free. In our day he would add three other divisions: rich and poor, black and white, been-here and come-here, and every time we let any of these three isolate us from one another we are sinning against the Lord and one another by letting other factors be more influential than he is. If you've never worshiped in a black church, take off a Sunday and go with my blessing. Broaden your view of the body of Christ. Visit a church that is below us on the economic scale and also one above us. Visit a Pentecostal or Roman Catholic Church. Bring back what you learned; share the riches of this wondrous thing called *the body of Christ* in all its delightful diversity.

Learning to live within the body of Christ in the environment of the Holy Spirit takes some getting used to; it's so different from the way the world organizes itself based on status and privilege and money and race and beauty and education and family name and all the other scales we use to find our place and keep others in theirs. In the body of Christ you are literally *in the world* but not *of it*, surrounded by the culture but operating on a entirely different value system. It's why we often feel out of place; we're not home yet.

Our present culture, stratified as it remains, is flat compared with Paul's world which had the emperor at the top of the pyramid of power, slaves at the bottom, and everyone else

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<sup>10</sup> PreachingToday.com search under 1 Cor. 12:12-27.

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carefully placed and ranked from top to bottom.<sup>11</sup> You looked up to those over you and down on those below you. It was vertically ordered with honor and praise flowing up the ranks, and hopefully help and provisions flowing down. One huge patronage system. Sometimes philosophers protested, but everyone knew that some people were inherently better than others. It was the unquestioned assumption of the ancient world. That is, until this new religious movement came along which claimed

that *all* were made in God's image,  
that *all* were sinners,  
that God had come in Christ for *all*,  
that *all* had spiritual gifts,  
that *all* might have a share in Christ's ministry of personal and world transformation.

What an incredible leveling effect! What a radical democratizing idea! All matter this much, even the lowest slave. And no one is exempt, even the highest Emperor. It was, as John the Baptist preached earlier, and Isaiah before him, a time for every valley to be lifted up and for every mountain and hill to be brought low.

Whereas some orators in Paul's day use the body image as an argument to keep people in their assigned social location in service of the belly of the body- meaning the rich and powerful, Paul turned the image inside out and upside down.<sup>12</sup> Under his teaching it became instead an argument for equality and mutual interdependence through a new reality called *the body of Christ*. We belong to Jesus Christ, and he has placed a high price on every person.

Now we all know that adjustment to new realities takes time. You say the vows, then come all the adjustments of the early married years. You stand before a military recruiter, say I do, then adjust to the rigors of boot camp. Getting used to this new way of thinking with the body of Christ also took time. Old ways and old ideas die hard.

There were some in the Corinthian church who suffered from the ignorance of low self-esteem, meaning they valued themselves less than Christ did, and also some who suffered from the ignorance of inflated self-esteem, meaning they valued others less than Christ did. The low-status people envied the high-status people. Paul voices their complaint in the skit of the talking body parts in verse 15, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong

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<sup>11</sup> For a nuanced description of that world and its anti-human agenda, see John Dominic Crossan, *God And Empire: Jesus Against Rome- The And Now* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Craig Keener, *1-2 Corinthians* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U.P., 2005), 103.

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to the body,” which is a lie. The higher-status people thought the lower status members a bother, as in verse 21, “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.’”

There is no mystery about where this up and down system of categorizing people came from. It was the sociological reality of the Greco-Roman world, and it exerted tremendous conforming pressure on all people, just like the structures of racism before the resistance of the Civil Rights movement. That’s how they behave out there in the world, but that is not how we see one another in the church. Here everyone matters, and no one is dispensable. You will feel the pressure outside, but within the family we play by different rules, and we often get it wrong because the shaping power of the culture is so pervasive. So please don’t tell anyone to move over because this is your seat in church. We gave up pew rentals when our movement came from England to the colonies. Make room for people, else the Lord may quit sending them. That’s just one example, but it hurts people’s feeling.<sup>13</sup>

It is good sometimes to use humor when dealing with touchy topics, which is just what Paul does in verses 15 through 21. He has parts of the body talking to one another, as in a cartoon. He also uses rhyme to make it memorable, “If the foot (Greek *pous*) should say... and if the ear (Greek *ous*) should say.... So now we have the *pous* and the *ous* speaking up. Then, to move from the humorous to the ridiculous, Paul displays a hundred and fifty pound eyeball and a six foot tall ear, “If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell?” Paul wants the Corinthians to laugh and smile at their own foolishness and see how deeply they’ve been infected by the world’s values where some are always more valuable than others.

Every organ, meaning every Christian with their particular spiritual gifts, is vital to the functioning of the whole. Imagine the courage it took in one of the Corinthian house churches for a slave to prophesy to or pray for Erastus the city treasurer, a man he could not look in the eye the next day. To some God says, “Come on up.” Or the faith it took for Erastus to abandon his status and receive blessing from such an unlikely one? To some God says, “Come on down and join me at the bottom of the pile where the blessing is.” Everyone belongs, and we all need each other, which means that all the silly status games programmed in our heads have to end. We have to point them out and make fun of them. Racism is a big one in our world; an even bigger one is rich and poor. But we are to live a different reality, and that means stretching our comfort zones in all directions.

Come to think of it, a local church which reaches in both directions- out to the rich and out to the poor, may be the only common space in our country in which rich and poor

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<sup>13</sup> For a lesson on church ushering and seating, see James 2:1-7.

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**I Corinthians 12:12-27 ..... 13**

have a chance to know each other on a personal level over time. Not just as givers and receivers of charity but as friends who pray for one another and work together to build up the body of Christ. It is a powerful thing- as has happened to me many times, to receive prayer from the poor and to sense God’s presence in an intense way.<sup>14</sup> In them, and in us all, are gifts to give, and we miss them if all we do is service our comfort zone and attend to our comfortable social circles of self-congratulation. When a poor person prays for a rich person and they are healed, it’s a new day for everyone. And when a person of high cultural status builds a genuine friendship with a person of low status, it’s a new day for everyone. We are to be a factory and experimental site for just those kinds of events that turn the games of the world upside down. The real test of a church is not how it treats the prominent and the well placed and the wealthy and the educated and the beautiful and the attractive and the smart and the accomplished, but how it welcome and loves and receives the spiritual gifts of those who are the opposite of all that we culturally admire and strive for. The people who are most easily ignored and shuffled off to the side. In them are treasures of faith and gifts of the Spirit necessary to the health of this church.

Funny thing about my body. When I stub my toe I feel the pain all over. And when I smile, my whole body enjoys the endorphins. A body than cannot feel pain is out of touch; a body than cannot enjoy pleasure is missing out on the joy God provides. So Paul ends his fable of the body with another indicative statement, *a declaration of what is*, verse 26, “If one member suffers, all suffer together. If one member is honored, all rejoice together.” If you wake up feeling poorly one morning, it may have nothing to do with your health; it may mean that some other part of the body of Christ has taken a big hit. Our fate and future are bound together. We are the body of Christ, and all members of it. We influence one another!

**Conclusion**

In ancient Corinth was a beautiful temple dedicated to the Asclepius, the god of healing. Ill persons would sleep within the precincts hoping for a healing dream or vision. Apparently it worked; when the temple was excavated, a huge number of clay body parts were found.<sup>15</sup>

In gratitude for the god’s favor, each supplicant presented a clay replica of the part that was healed as an offering. Everyone in Corinth knew about the display of body parts in the temple of Asclepius. Rows and rows of lifeless, clay replicas, cut off from one another. Too many churches are like that, and it is the opposite of what Paul envisioned. Not a pile

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<sup>14</sup> James 2:5.

<sup>15</sup> For a collection from the Corinth museum, go to [holylandphotos.wordpress.com/tag/corinth/](http://holylandphotos.wordpress.com/tag/corinth/) and scroll down to “The Seldom-visited Asclepion at Corinth.”

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**I Corinthians 12:12-27 ..... 14**

of disconnected parts, but the living and unified body of Christ with each part joined in a working unity with all the others.<sup>16</sup>

After an accident in which she lost her arm, Jamie refused to go to school or church for an entire year. Finally the young teen decided to face her peers. In preparation, her mother called the Sunday school teacher and asked that he not call attention to Jamie. The teacher promised, but when he got sick on Sunday and had to call a substitute, he forgot to tell the second teacher.

At the conclusion of the lesson, which was about inviting friends to church, the sub led the class in doing the hand motions to the familiar children's poem:

“Here's the church, and here's the steeple.  
Open the door, and see all the people. “

Jamie's eyes filled with tears. A 13-year-old boy went over and knelt beside her. With one hand apiece, they supported each other, making the church, steeple, and people. Together they got it right.<sup>17</sup>

The question is, Will we? Will be dare to be who we are- the body of the risen Jesus through which the energies and life of the Holy Spirit flow freely. John Lennon asked the question, “All the lonely people, where do they all belong?” Answer: They belong to our Lord, and they belong to us. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Phil Thrailkill  
Main Street UMC  
September 9, 2012

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<sup>16</sup> Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1983), 165-167.

<sup>17</sup> Billy Waters, *Teacher Touch* (Colorado Springs: Cook, 1999).

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**III. STUDY QUESTIONS**

**I Cor. 12:12**

1. How is v.12 a statement of a truth we all understand intuitively because we are bodies?
2. How does the U.S. motto *E Pluribus Unum* apply to the body politic, to the church?
3. Is the phrase “so it is with Christ” a surprise? Did you expect “so it is with the church”?

**1 Cor. 12:13-14**

4. How does baptism give us both a new external environment and a new internal reality?
5. How does baptism wash away the ways a culture divides people from one another?
6. How do sour cultures exaltation of individualism hurt and impede the life of the church?

**1 Cor. 12:15-21**

7. Paul uses two literary techniques in vv.15-21, 1) personification and 2) reductio ad absurdum. How are these evidence of humor in early Christian teaching?
8. Note how the theme of v.14 is repeated in v.20. What is so important as to be repeated?

**1 Cor. 12:22-25**

9. Paul’s argument is that both nature and we hide our reproductive and excretory organs. They are of great value, but hidden. This is a volatile analogy that can easily be misapplied in a crude fashion, but what does it teach about the often hidden and ignored members ?

**1 Cor. 12:26-27**

10. Do we really have this deep effect on one another? Paul was speaking to a small band of Christians meeting in homes who knew each other well. Does this apply to large groups?

**IV. APPLICATION QUESTIONS**

1. Visit another church. Ask yourself, “Are these people family I do not yet know?”
  2. In a world that overvalues human will and decisions, think about why it is such a humbling thing to admit that only the Holy Spirit can join us to the body of Christ.
  3. Why will the church always have to address inferior and superior members?
  4. Where does God most often work through me? Is this a sign of the Spirit’s gifting? Where do I see the work of the Holy Spirit in others? Have I encouraged them by telling them?
  5. Why would I ever hurt or wound a member of my own body? How is this sin?
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