

Lesson 3

Unity and Diversity

1 Corinthians 12.12-20

Overview

Previously we discussed how unity and diversity is a good thing. The body of Christ would not function without it. We also talked about how we are stewards of the gift(s) God has given us and are expected to put them to use in the kingdom. As we work, we will be an encouragement to others to exercise their gift. And finally, we talked about when each member is doing their part amazing things happen inside the church, where it is led toward maturity and the gospel message is spread. In this lesson we will see how Paul expands on his discussion of unity and diversity. The church is like a body, which each member sharing a common origin through their regeneration which occurred at baptism. In that moment each believer is drenched in the Spirit and brought together as one into the body of the saints. Because we share the same origin, there is no room for pride or arrogance. In fact, every member is dependent upon the other. God has arranged the parts inside the body just as He wills.

The Bigger Picture

The Corinthian church had come to look a lot like the world. They had essentially brought in the culture of their day into the life of the church (hierarchy, classism, sexually immoral behavior, etc.) Paul's goal in this chapter deals with their tendency to want to divide up into classes or divisions over the type of spiritual gifts members received. Those who had the more public gifts were seen as more important as those who did not. And those with the public gifts were lording it over others ... that their gift made them more spiritual than the "quiet" gifts. Paul needed to get them to understand that every person is important inside the body and has a place where they can influence others.

The Text

NLT:

1 Corinthians 12:12–20 (NLT)

¹² The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. ¹³ Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit. ¹⁴ Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part. ¹⁵ If the foot says, "I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand," that does not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear says, "I am not part of the body because I am not an eye," would that make it any less a part of the body? ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, how would you hear? Or if your whole body were an ear, how would you smell anything? ¹⁸ But our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where he wants it. ¹⁹ How strange a body would be if it had only one part! ²⁰ Yes, there are many parts, but only one body.

CSB:

1 Corinthians 12:12–20 (CSB)

¹² For just as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of that body, though many, are one body—so also is Christ. ¹³ For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and we were all given one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴ Indeed, the body is not one part but many. ¹⁵ If the foot should say, “Because I’m not a hand, I don’t belong to the body,” it is not for that reason any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, “Because I’m not an eye, I don’t belong to the body,” it is not for that reason any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But as it is, God has arranged each one of the parts in the body just as he wanted. ¹⁹ And if they were all the same part, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

Explore the Text

1. Why do you think Paul was being so adamant regarding diversity in the body? Why the need to remind them of the diversity of parts?
2. What or Who made the Corinthians one? When did this happen? (12.13)
3. How does Paul illustrate the point of 12.14? (See 12.15-17)
4. Who arranged the members of the body? Why is that important to understand?
5. What impact would the body make if it were all the same part?

About the Text

In this section, Paul begins to illustrate the oneness of the church itself. What makes it one? It is the diversity of the many parts working together in unison. Diversity is a key element of God's plan, demonstrating His power and grace. But each member also needs to recognize and accept his part or place inside the body. If he or she does not, it will become a source of division and bring discord.

I. 12.12-13 – Unity and Its Origin

- A. 12.12: The human body is a perfect example to illustrate the unity and interconnectedness of the church.
 - i. Just as the human body is one with many differing parts (members) so is the body of Christ.
 - ii. Each member has its own gift and function but works for the common good of the whole.
 - iii. The variety of differing parts must not cancel out unity ... instead it should be worked out in the daily life of the church.
- B. 12.13: The source of our unity is the Spirit.
 - i. Upon the occasion of our baptism, we were regenerated by the Spirit, bringing us from spiritual death into life, and placed into the body of Christ. *Every Christian has been baptized in the Spirit.*
 - ii. Drinking of the Spirit does not refer to communion. Rather, the Spirit has been given in overflowing abundance to every believer in the church. As one writer says, *we have been drenched in the Spirit.*
 - iii. We share a common bond in the body because everyone of us has been plunged into and drenched with the Spirit.²
- C. Since the gifts come from the Spirit and are assigned/arranged by the Father (12.18), there is no basis for pride or arrogance. The gifts we have do not represent our personal spirituality or excellence. Rather, they have been given for the good of the local church.

II. 12.14-16: The Unity and Diversity of the Body

- A. The church is like a body. Our bodies are characterized by unity and diversity. The fact that diversity exists is not a threat to unity. In fact, it is an essential to the functioning and effectiveness of the body.
- B. Every part is vital. No person is inferior, inconsequential, or unnecessary. Every member is needed for the body to function.

III. 12.17-20: God Places the Parts of the Body Where He Wills

- A. Self-promotion kills the spirit of unity. This is why Paul wrote *not to think of (yourself) more highly than (you) should think. Instead, think sensibly, as God has distributed a measure of faith to each one*, Romans 12.3.
 - i. Looking down or excluding other members, disparaging their gifts, harms the body. One writer refers to it as “self-mutilation”.

² Schreiner, Thomas R. *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*. Edited by Eckhard J. Schnabel. Vol. 7 of *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*. London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2018, p. 263.

- B. God has placed every individual in the body exactly where He wants them to be. The gifts reflect His oversight and wisdom. From the beginning, God has designed His church to have many parts, but be one body.

Reaction

1. In your mind, what should the church look like as it works out its diversity of gifts in the every day life of the church? Explain.
2. Why do you think Paul continues to remind his readers (and us) that our gifts are gifts from the Spirit? Why is understanding their origin so vital to unity in the church?
3. Verses 14-16 describe our interconnectedness and dependence upon other members of the local church for proper functioning. Can we effectively carry out our spiritual responsibilities if we do not have a strong connection (relationship) with the other members?
4. Does diversity threaten unity, or is it vital to it? Explain.
5. Is there any part of the spiritual body that is inconsequential or unnecessary? What can you do to encourage fellow members from feeling that way? How does this fit into the charge to *build up the body*, 14.26b.
6. How does self-promotion kill unity?
7. How does an understanding that God has placed you in the body exactly where He wants you help you as you think about your role in the church?

For the Christian Today

Every part is designed to work. In his illustration, Paul used the senses of touch, sight, smell, and hearing. Without those, we are limited. (I don't think I ever appreciated my sense of smell more than after it came back after battling COVID-19.) We need to be thankful that there are those who add what we cannot. Together, we work. Together, we get things done. Ephesians 4.16 presents us with some great thoughts on how everyone works. *Every joint supplies*, Paul says. Problems arise when some don't supply. They just take. Like a hitchhiker who hopes you'll stop and pick them up and carry them to their destination, they are just along for the ride and don't help in any way. When the church has taken them as far as they want to go, they'll get out. We all need to be adding and supplying to the whole.

Encouragement and prayers are the easiest way we can help. Its serving as shepherds and deacons. Its teaching classes. Its giving up a Saturday for someone who needs help. Its staying late after services to talk to someone who is discouraged. Supplying. Adding. Doing our part. Working. *Every joint supplies*.³

Interdependence is something to be valued. Most of us seem to prefer *independence*. Culture has engrained us not to want to need other people. Dependence is often associated with weakness or deficiency.⁴ People of our age take pride in their autonomy. Whether we realize this or not, our cultural bent can play a role into how unity is worked out in the day-to-day life of the church. God has designed church life to be enhanced by interdependence, where each member can be harmoniously dependent upon others for his or her identity.

The church functions as a body. The church is not a collection of separate individuals going around doing their own thing. The church is not a democracy. The church does not divide itself into partisan groups (1 Corinthians 1.13). Every part is vitally connected and is to function like a body. If a member is not doing his or her job, then someone else must do the work for which they are not equipped. The only way the church can function as it should is by each person using the gift the Spirit has given them just as God desired. We all have what God desires for us. *Think sensibly, as God has distributed a measure of faith to each one*, Romans 12.3b. We should each receive our gift with profound thanks. We should see the usage of that gift as a privilege.

Journal

What are some things you can do to develop a stronger connection with other members of the local body? What is your plan of action this week to put this into action?

³ Shouse, Roger. "Jumpstart #3110." Jumpstarts Daily Devotional. Online. Charlestownroadcoc.org.

⁴ Um, Stephen T. *1 Corinthians: The Word of the Cross*. Edited by R. Kent Hughes. Preaching the Word. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015, p. 221.

For Further Study

Today's passage in 1 Corinthians 12 parallels Paul's teaching in Ephesians 4.11-16. How are these passages similar? What can we learn when we tie them together?