



Christ-Centered Community

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

Grace Church | 9.5.21

This morning we come back to examine where in the Scriptures we find explanations of another one of our new core values. If you were not here last week I want to reiterate that these values are simply shared language meant to help us define together what it means to follow Jesus' great commission, which is the mission of ours and every church. He commands us to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them. So what are the convictions that will keep us grounded in that mission into the future? Last week we said that that first conviction, that first value, is Biblical, Historic, Christianity. Which just means this: we are grounded in a faith that has been passed down to us, we didn't make up, is revealed to us in the Bible, and points us to Jesus Christ. This week we have a new value, which will seem again somewhat unsurprising to you: *Christ-Centered Community*.

The reason it should not seem too surprising to you that a church values community is that no one really comes to church in order to be alone. They may act that way, but we all know we could be home right now, getting what we feel like is an extra Saturday to lounge around, do housework, and recover from a long week. We can even tune in to any number of church serves and observe other Christians being together and get some sort of spiritual fix. But we don't, or we didn't today. We come to the house of God because we desire community. The question is not then: "Is the church a community?" but rather "what kind of community is the church?". And to answer that question, we need some context. I would argue we actually have to way back.

What Kind of Community is the Church? (12-13)

See, we go back to the Garden, and we find the first community, Adam and Eve and God. And that community is broken by sin. So whereas it was a community marked by walking with God in perfection, now it is a community marked by pain and death, as evidenced by Cain and Abel. With one son dead, and the other banished by God, how will this community continue? Well, God calls a third son, Seth, from the death of Abel to life in him. But again, the community is haunted by sin. Somewhere along the line, we get to Noah, Seth's descendent, and the community God created is described as being wicked continually. All the time. So God again calls out a new community in Noah and his family. Of course, even after they are brought through the flood of death to new life, they are broken by sin. So you have Babel as our example: a scattering of community. But again, God calls out Abraham and promises him: I'm still in the business of community—and I'm going to do it through you. I'll bless the whole world. So God does this whole life from death again: from the



dead womb of Sarah, Issac comes to life. From Issac comes Jacob, who narrowly escapes from death by the hand of his brother Esau who he tricked, and is called out by God. His son Joseph too, is brought from death to life, and calls this community of God to Egypt. In Egypt, you know that God calls Moses and saves his people through an Exodus that leads them through the waters of death and into life on the other side. And on and on we go, without time to trace all the details of how God is in the business of calling his people from death to life, again and again, by giving them called out representatives in the judges, in the prophets, in his wise kings. And all the while God is promising that there is one more death to life event coming, one more calling out, a greater calling. He promises the community will no longer be marked by sin and rebellion, but the community will be a different kind of community.

I tell you this to remind you that when we speak about the church, there are two acts in the drama. And to ignore or forget the first act of God's work in the Old Testament is to try to understand the play by coming in at intermission.¹ But now let's fast forward to the city of Corinth, in the first century, and things are a bit different. There are ethnic Jews here, but also plenty of Gentiles. And they are struggling as a community, because they seem to be a community that is known for their division and their impurity. They can't get along, they can't hold a gathering without chaos, they won't do anything about the man in their community who is sleeping with his own step-mother! They divide over what food to eat, over who gets a seat at the table, about which apostle is better. Their community is a divided, unholy one, no unlike the community of God in the past. And so Paul sends them a letter. And how does he address them?

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

To the church of God in Corinth, the community of God, those *unholy*? No, those sanctified, holy. Those divided? No, those *called out together*. And notice too, he recognizes that he is not only speaking to that outwardly unholy and divided church in Corinth, he is speaking to all those who in every place call upon the name of Jesus. He is speaking to us. That's us. What kind of community is the church? *Called out together to be holy*. Chosen by God, like Abraham, like Joseph, like Moses, like David, called out. Together—called out as one, the many become one. And holy, somehow brought from death to life, from impurity to purity. United, even if we appear divided on everything from politics to healthcare to education to bank accounts to skin color to which flavor sparkling water we enjoy. Holy saints, even if we appear to be gossips, cheats, liars, prideful adulterers. How is this possible? Why us, here, now, nowhere near ethnic Israel?

This is the burden of Paul in 1 Corinthians. He must show how he can write to a church divided and messed up and call them unified saints. And so we come to chapter 12, and he has been laboring to that end. He has called them out, he has spoken the truth. And he moves again to impress upon them the reality of their community even if it feels outwardly impossible. And he does so with a simple analogy we find in **verse 12**.

¹ From Alistair Begg, "Where Do I Belong in the Church?"



Here is the presupposition that allows Paul to call a jacked up church unified saints. He says: “you know how a body works right?” It’s one body, you don’t have two. But your body is made up of parts, of “members”. So I could chop you up into little pieces, and you would have all the parts of a body, but you wouldn’t be a body. Or I could make you into one part, say a giant brain, but you wouldn’t be a body. Why? Because everyone knows a body must be one and also many. Duh. But then he says something unexpected. We expect him to say: “so it is with you” or “so it is with the church.” But look, what does he say? So it is with Christ.

You’re not a spiritual body on your own. You’re a spiritual part. You only become a spiritual body when you no longer identify as “self” but you identify as “Christ”. Christ unites you to all the other parts. And how does he do it? Like he always has. **Verse 13**. It’s by his Spirit, one spirit, not a divided one, he issues one call, calls you out, you turn from sin and to him, and he baptizes you into his body. Why baptism here? Because baptism is Christ bringing you from death to life. It’s literally him *submerging* you, drowning you, as Noah was brought through the flood, so are you brought out of the water into life. And when you are, regardless if you are a Jewish or a Greek or an enslaved or a free body part, you cease to become just a body part. You become a body part that is part of a body. That phrase there “drink from one Spirit” gets at the same idea. It literally can be translated “be drenched” by one Spirit. It’s another way of pointing back and saying: there is one source of this “embodying”. Like Noah went from death to life by the baptismal flood, and like the Israelies drank from the one Rock opened in the wilderness and did not die, so there is one baptism and one water source. It’s God’s Spirit, that one source making you into one body with the Son, Jesus Christ. So Paul summarizes the simple logic in **verse 14**.

What kind of community is the church? What kind of community is this? Just like the Corinthians, we are natural enemies, prone to division, and natural sinners, prone to impurity. We are many, diverse, and so our divisions are diverse and our impurities are diverse. But we are one body in Christ.

What a marvel this image is. What a God who can do this. Look at your hands. Consider what it would be like to lose one of your hands, how limited you would be. You’ve never once questioned whether your hand was a part of you, and it’s easy to undervalue. Now look around at your brothers and sisters in Christ. They are your hands! They are your body. What a miracle is this, that they are closer to us in Christ than the physical parts we carry around all day, that we are united in a way that is so natural and supernatural. We are many, we are one. Christ is all. We are a Christ-Centered community: we the body, he the head.



Let's move on then, away from this question for now, to two realities we must keep in mind if we are to truly value Christ-Centered community.

You Can't Unbody Yourself, Because You Are Needy and Needed. (14-20)

Man, sometimes I really love reading Paul. The analogy here is so self-explanatory. He doesn't get into the weeds. He is writing to a church that feels divided. And he knows there are members of this body who consider themselves too different to fit. Perhaps that comes from hurt they've received, or from their own sin. Either way, there is some kind of insecurity that is hinted here. The objection is: "we are so diverse, and so different, how could we really be unified?". And Paul's answer is simple in **verses 15-16**.

The scenario is sort of like this: you come to church, and you don't really feel like you belong. You are skeptical if you belong here. You truly feel that you have been raised to new life in Christ, but you are finding it difficult to build relationships and jive with other Christians. And then you think: "ah, I understand why I don't feel connected. It's because I'm just a small piece. They can do this whole church thing without me. I'm not really needed. There is no purpose in me trying to connect, in diving into community group or into discipleship. I am a Christian, but I'm not part of the body." And here is Scripture's answer. Are you ready? The objection: "I don't feel I am part of the body". The answer: "too bad. You are." There it is, right in the text. You can say all day: "I am not a part, I am my own, I am just a foot" But that's actually impossible, you see? A severed foot is not a foot. It does no walking. Cutting yourself off from the body doesn't make you an independent Christian, it makes you a Christian in denial. Because the very definition of Christian is "body part" and the very definition of "body part" is "attached to a body." Man, I love this analogy. You can't unbody yourself!

Look at **verse 17**. In other words, not only is it true that if you are cut off from the body, you are dead, but also if you don't belong to the body, the body dies a little too! Your differences, your diversity, do not single that you are not a part of the body, your differences single that you are part of the body! The fact that you feel different from others, that not everyone here is your natural friend, that not everyone here is your enneagram or something, that you just click with and feel instant connection, that's actually what makes the body a body. If you didn't feel that sense of awkwardness, there is your clue that you really aren't part of a body, you're part of some monstrosity, a giant eye or a giant ear. A uniform church is an oxymoron, as **19** tells us.

And so for all those who feel as if they cannot belong in the community of God. Who hear "christ-centered community" and really just think "the cool people, the smart people, the people unlike me", I hope **verse 18** is comforting. Why is it impossible to unbody yourself? Because God arranged it that way. He designed his body, under Christ, to reject uniformity but embrace unity. You may feel disunified, and unholy. You may feel like you are the only one of your kind. But here me out, brother or sister who says: "because I am not such and such, I do not belong to the body".



Your doubt about your place doesn't make your place insecure. Your feelings of insecurity, your hesitancy to jump in, your feelings of inferiority, your weakness before God, doesn't forfeit your seat at the table. God in Christ has made you his own, he has called you out of darkness and into his light, he has baptized you down into death and drawn you up again to be his forever. And in doing so, he made you part of his body, a miracle which you cannot undo. Hear this: we are all weak. We all doubt if we belong. The people who say they don't or who appear that they don't are just faking it. But none of us have to fake it. Here is my charge to you, if you feel disembodied from Christ's people:

Go to them. Find someone, some member of this church who you respect, who exudes Godliness. And confess to them. Tell them your doubt, show them your weakness. Expose your differences. Stop pretending. And ask them to pray for you. That won't be everything, but it will be a lot. Come out of the shadows, take steps of faith. It will be awkward, and others will fail you. They may even at times shut you out. But Christ has made you a part of them, and he won't fail you. He won't shut you out. Christ spilt his blood to wash you into him by the Spirit. You are both needy and needed, and that is God's beautiful plan for his church. Your heavenly father arranged you just as you are to fit into his church just as they are. And he isn't in the business of recalls. He doesn't make mistakes.

You Can't Unbody Anyone Else, Because They Are Needy and Needed. (21-26)

In any community, there are at least two kinds of people. Those who feel as if they don't belong, and try to pretend that they do, and those who feel like they do belong, and try to pretend like others don't. The Christ-Centered community can put both of these categories to rest. Not only are we unable to unbody ourselves, we can't unbody anyone else. Look at **verse 21**.

It does not say: "the eye should not say to the hand, I have no need of you." It says "the eye *cannot* say to the hand." This means that to harbor any thought in your heart that there is a member of Christ's body who is of no value to you is not just to disrespect them, it's to live a lie. To consider any member as dispensable, as unnecessary, as replaceable, is to live in fantasy land. Why? Because **verses 22-24** tells us the opposite is true.

Here Paul extends his analogy. There are some parts of the body, namely the internal ones like organs and bones and veins, that seem to be weaker. They seem to be disposable, because they aren't seen. But in reality, they are indispensable. They are not weaker, they appear weaker. Similarly, there are parts of the body that "we think less honorable" or are "unpresentable". Most commentators agree that Paul actually likely has in mind sexual parts—they are unpresentable in public, and so they are covered up. These parts of the body require more modesty, but that word modesty is also translated as "decorum". In covering up, we also embellish. We wear clothes not just to cover ourselves, but to beautify ourselves too. In other words, we may think that parts of the body are "unseemly" but in reality, we dress up those parts of the body. We show more "honor" to them in this way.



Without trying to make a one-to-one metaphor to the church body, we can take away Paul's main point here. You can say to another member of the body: "I have no need of you." And you may say that because you feel that part of the body is hidden, or that part of the body is dishonorable, but in reality, that is not the way a body works. A body will also need every part, and will always make up for whatever part lacks. If you have bad eyesight, you won't neglect to get glasses. No, you honor your eyes and get some decorum on them. Why? Because you need them. You may complain about having to have glasses, but you can never say to your eyes: "I have no need of you." Every part is indispensable. And so it is that every Christian, regardless of their real or perceived weakness, is indispensable.

Let me give you an example of how this may play out in our church. It is no surprise to most of you that our church is growing quickly in the last few months. You look around and see many new faces. And you may begin to wonder, will we have enough room? What about community groups, will those change with new visitors? What if that change is bad? I think there are two common solutions you may hear. We can think about this in the context of community groups.

One solution is to say: let's tighten up a bit. Community is all about friendship, so we need to be slow in connecting people. It's relationship-centered community. We need to place people in the right groups and with the right people that they will click with. These friendships will help them follow Jesus more closely in the long run, create unity, and lasting relationships. So what do we do? We create pockets of church where we are all alike, where we will naturally fit. We don't multiply groups very often, because that can ruin budding friendships. And while we don't turn people away, we aren't constantly growing, because that also hinders friendship. And it's true, more friendships are formed. It's a hard thing, like we saw in Proverbs, but it can work. And yet, what tends to happen, when your community is primarily based on friendship, it's easy to say to all those that you struggle to click with: "I have no need of you. I'm sure someone does, but I don't. I'm not saying you are worthless, but it's just not working here." And instead of becoming a body, we become a bunch of disconnected parts. We become a social club.

The other solution is to say: we are united primarily around growth and multiplication. Community is all about doing things together, it is action-centered community. So we are constantly inviting people in, constantly pushing for more growth, constantly multiplying our group and finding new leaders and pushing out and out. And the idea is that it will unite us. And in some way, it does. There is a buzz, there is an excitement, and God is often glorified greatly! But then someone looks around and realizes: "do I really know these people?" They are all so passionate, so seemingly holy. I feel like I was just getting to know them, and they sent me out with more strangers! And so it's easy to leave people behind, who then say: "because I am not like them, I must not belong". And instead of becoming a body, we become a machine. We become a service organization.

But hear me out: I believe there is a way to create a community where relationships can flourish and the mission of God can flourish. Where we are both deeply engaging and deeply welcoming. What if you walked into a Community Group and instead of relationships being the center, or action being the center, Christ was the center? What if, instead of the less active being left behind



or the less social being left out, we all really *belonged*? What if, instead of a social club or a service organization, we became a body? Instead of uniformity, there was true unity?

This is the vision of the church of God. How is it possible? Well, it starts with remembering who we are. We are a divided, unholy community that has been made into a unified, sanctified body. We were dead, now we are alive. And we owe all of that, to Christ. So why not base our community on that? What would it be like if every community group and every discipleship group was marked by a robust desire to expose our own weakness and sin and to rejoice in the work of God in Christ? What if we welcomed each other not by putting on a mask or putting our heads down to do, do, do, but we welcomed one another by confessing our need? Can you imagine? You walk into community group, and men and women of God start confessing their sins, suffering together, rejoicing together, and caring for one another, and they are honest about their insecurity, and they are asking not for a social connection or a to-do list, but the warm embrace of Christ through the arms of his people. This is EXACTLY the picture we see of the body in **verses 24-26**.

No division. The opposite of division is *the same care*. It's care. It's the more excellent way, the way of love. It's suffering together, crying together, confessing our sins together. It's welcoming the sinner who is new, who steps into our community and feels like he can never belong, but then he hears the leader showcase his need and he realizes: these people are just like me, they are messed up. And then he hears that the same community care and suffer together, and give one another the good news and call one another to Christian action, and he thinks: these people are just like, but not like me. They share a need that every human shares, but they share a solution that only Christians share. This is a Christ-centered community > he is the only reason we would ever be together. And we honor one another too: we rejoice with one another. See, what is so crazy about this is that when we stop chasing community as relationship at all cost and action at all cost, and seek Christ at all cost, both action and relationship flow out! We welcome one another as Christ welcomed us, and we send one another out on mission as Christ has sent us. But this only happens when we start being Christ to one another. It only happens when we realize that he has made us into a body, and there is nothing we can do about it except be in this thing together. He has made us all needy and all needed.

I pray often, maybe more than anything else, that we would be a united church. But here is the thing: Jesus already united us. He did it all. So our prayer is not: "can we be united?", it's "will we wake up and realize it?" And friends, members of Christ's body, today we have a glorious opportunity to realize it. It's called The Lord's Supper. In Corinth, they were condemning themselves for excluding the poor from the supper. But here, all in Christ are welcome. Those who suffer from the thought that they don't belong: here we share this meal. Those who suffer from the thought that others don't belong: here we share this meal. And this meal is Christ. At this table we spiritually feed on him by faith. And we do it, as those who have been baptized into one Spirit, together. Let's pray before this supernatural supper.

