

The Big Picture

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Key Verse: 27 “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

Before my opening question, I want you to think about one or two church members you often work with. Now, my opening questions: “What comes to mind when you think about them?” And, “What do you think about yourself?” Perhaps you think, “He is a highly gifted and outstanding leader, but I feel small compared to him.” Or, “The other person is inexperienced and immature; I am better than him.” These feelings of inferiority and superiority, envy, or pride in our relationships with church members lead to conflict and division.

The city of Corinth was a diverse and wealthy trade city. Likewise, the Corinthian church was rich and diverse in spiritual gifts (1 Cor 1:7). Sadly, this diversity led to conflicts. Some, who had gifts like speaking in tongues, prophesying, or teaching, were given more honor. They boasted about their spiritual gifts. Others envied them for those gifts, and when they didn’t have much to boast about, they boasted about their Bible teachers!

Today, the Apostle Paul addresses divisions over spiritual gifts. How does he help them? By helping them to see the church from God’s big picture perspective. When we also see and accept God’s big picture of the church, the body of Christ, then the church becomes loving, caring, and dynamic—building one another up. The church grows healthy and mature, and it carries out Christ’s mission powerfully. May the Holy Spirit reveal God’s big picture for the church today.

I. The Big Picture – The Church is the Body of Christ (12–13, 27)

One of the main causes of conflict in the Corinthian church was their worldly and distorted concept of church. To them, church was like “Corinth’s Got Talent”—a competition. Some boasted about their gifts, wealth, or positions, feeling superior. Others, by contrast, felt unimportant or even useless. Paul rebuked them for their childish and worldly view of the church and its members (3:1–2).

In 12:1–11, while speaking about diverse spiritual gifts, Paul emphasized one key truth: spiritual gifts are *not* human talents or abilities. They are distributed by the Holy Spirit to each person as He wills. Before we can recognize and use our gifts, we must first be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18a) and desire what the Spirit desires (Ro 8:5a). Only when

we are empowered by the Spirit can we use our gifts for their true purpose: the common good and God's glory.

In verse 12, Paul introduces a crucial metaphor for the church: *the body*. Let's read verse 12. ***“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.”*** The church of Christ, though made up of many members, is one body—the living and breathing body of Christ on earth.

With this metaphor, Paul emphasizes two inseparable truths: the ONE body of Christ, and the MANY members that make up Christ's body. There is no body without its members united together.

But how and when was this one body formed? Verse 13 explains: ***“For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”*** In Genesis, God breathed His Spirit into Adam, and he became a living being. In Acts, at Pentecost, God poured out His Spirit on those gathered in Jesus' name, and the church was born—a new creation, a new living being. Yet this new man consists of many members.

To understand verse 13 better, note that “baptized” means “united” or “made one with.” When we accepted Christ as Lord, the Holy Spirit made us new creations, uniting us with Christ. But that's not all—Paul says we were also baptized into one body, the church, together with all believers. This is the universal church. More than that, the Corinthian believers were united with each other to form the local body of Christ.

Let's read our key verse, verse 27: ***“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”*** Here Paul defines the church. The “you” is not a building—it is the assembly of believers. Each one of us, individually, is part of the body of Christ, and together we *are* the body of Christ. Even the Corinthians—though immature, worldly, and sinful—were still the body of Christ, because they confessed Jesus as Lord, believed that God raised Him from the dead, and gathered under His Lordship (1Co 12:3–4; Ro 10:9).

The phrase “body of Christ” also implies that Christ is the head. Colossians 1:18 says, ***“And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.”*** No human leader—not even the Pope or pastors—can be the head of the church.

The same is true for us today. When we believe in Jesus, we belong to both the universal church and our local church. Because I belong to Christ and you belong to Christ, we also belong to one another. The one body of Christ is sustained by the one Spirit. That is why we cannot say, “I love Jesus, but I hate the church.” The church is Christ’s body, and Christ is its head. To hate the church is to hate Christ—and even ourselves. Therefore, I can say, I love Jesus, and I love the church, the body of Jesus! Thank you Jesus, for making me a new creation, and making me a member of your precious body, the church!

So when we catch this big picture— the church is the body of Christ, with Christ as the head, and we are individually members of it, then everything changes. We can properly understand the universal church, our local church, ourselves, and our gifts. But if we do not have this perspective, then we focus on myself and others, or “my gifts vs. your gifts,” and easily fall into the same divisions as the Corinthians.

From this big picture, we can draw 2 important applications.

II. Diversity and unity in the body of Christ (14-26)

First, you and I belong to the body (14-20). In verse 14, Apostle Paul reminds us that the body does not consist of one member, but of many; and each member belongs to the body. Look at verses 15-16. ***“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.”*** Though this would never happen in a physical body, it often happens in the church. Here the foot and ear represent those who feel unimportant compared to “highly performing” members in the church, like the hand or an eye. Honestly, I feel like a foot whenever I compare myself to P. Mark or Kevin. I feel I’m not good enough, so I don’t belong. But Paul says to anyone who feels unimportant, inferior, or inadequate, ***“You are no less a part of the body. You belong. You are essential.”*** Paul continues in verses 17 and 19. ***“If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? ... If all were a single member, where would the body be?”*** Diverse gifts are necessary for the church, the body, to function.

Look at verses 18 and 20. *“But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose ... As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.”* Paul repeats “as it is” twice. God Himself arranged the diverse members, as it is, according to his sovereignty. Therefore, the member next to you is not your competitor but a fellow

member placed by God. We are to celebrate the diversity and differences in our spiritual gifts in the body of Christ. As each of us is important, valuable and indispensable, we ought to value and respect ourselves and others. And each of us ought to work together, bringing wholeheartedly our unique spiritual gifts to serve Christ and his body and this world.

When we acknowledge and joyfully use our God-given spiritual gifts to serve the body of Christ, then we find our true value and purpose. But if we hold back our spiritual gifts, or sit on the sidelines, thinking I am insignificant and useless, then we slowly cut ourselves off from the church, the body of Christ. We find we have cut ourselves off from Christ. And then we become a cut branch that will wither and die. So I pray that each of us, including myself, may fully offer our spiritual gifts, knowing that I belong here and my spiritual gifts are indispensable to the body of Christ.

Second, I need you (21-26). In verse 13 we learned that the Spirit already baptized us into one body. Unity is not something we create; it is something we keep. Ephesians 4:3 says, ***“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”***

How can we do so practically? Look at 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.”** Imagine an eye needs a pair of glasses. In a split second, the eye says to its hand, “I need you!” Then the hand immediately responds so the eye can see. Though the eye and hand are totally different, they are interconnected and interdependent.

Many times, something is easier if I do it by myself. Also in our individualistic society where we value independence, if we need help, then we feel weak or incapable or even burdensome. However, Paul tells us that anyone in the body of Christ cannot say, “I have no need of you!” In Greek, “cannot” is emphatic— it is impossible. No part, no eye, or hand can survive by itself.

How, then, can we apply this? Firstly, we should never feel ashamed to say to another, “I need you!” When we humbly acknowledge our interconnectedness and interdependence, then unity in diversity begins to grow. No matter what conflicts and problems you may have with the persons in your mind, never separate yourself from them. Find even one way we have a need for each other.

Paul reveals a second secret in verses 22-24. ***“On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow 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 greater honor to the part that lacked it...”***

In this world, we either seem weak, less honorable, unpresentable OR strong, honorable and presentable. And the latter get glory, power and wealth and take advantage of the less honorable. But Paul tells Christians to live a counter-cultural life. So, consider the weaker members indispensable; let's bestow less honorable members greater honor; treat the unpresentable members with greater modesty.

In truth, our Lord Jesus Christ lived such a life on earth. He emptied himself of glory and honor as God and became a servant. He sought after the lost and healed the sick. He called sinners, not the righteous. He honored the widow's pennies but not the vast offering of the rich. In the end, he gave his life on the cross as a ransom for the sins of the world. Thus, dishonorable sinners like us can receive true honor: forgiveness of sins and sonship in God.

If we practice Jesus' humble, sacrificial, loving life toward our weaker members, unity will grow stronger and stronger. This unity is what Jesus prayed for in John 17:21, ***“that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”*** Such unity glorifies God. It is the most effective and powerful testimony to reveal God's glory and to evangelize the world.

Verses 25-26 say ***“...that there may be no division 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.”*** There will be no divisions, but rather we care and share each other's suffering and joys.

Now can you see what the body of Christ with many members looks like? One head, one body with many members, one Spirit, one care, one heart. The church is the new man on earth. Just as Adam was called to care for God's creation, so the church is called to carry out God's mission (Lk 4:18-19).

Now, with this big picture in mind, Paul turns to spiritual gifts. Verse 28 says: ***“And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of***

tongues.” “First,” “second,” and “third” are not a hierarchy but an order of foundation. Just as a building starts with a foundation, the church was built on the teachings of the apostles and prophets (Eph 2:20). Teachers interpret the Scriptures so that believers grow in faith and knowledge (Eph 4:11–13). Then God confirms His church through miracles, healing, service, administration, and tongues.

Though Paul lists many gifts in verses 28–30, he urges us to desire the higher gifts—especially love and prophecy, which build up the church (1Co 13–14:25).

In conclusion, God’s big picture in redemptive history is that the church is the body of Christ with each precious member. So I ask you: *Will you love the church and the members of the church?* Will you offer your spiritual gifts, no matter how small, to build up the church? Will you confess to one another, “You and I belong to the body of Christ. I need you and I value you”? Let’s read our key verse again: **“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”** May God engrave this picture in our hearts so that we may love the church and each member. Together, as the body of Christ, may we reveal the majestic beauty of Christ to the world.