

# The Church is the body of Christ

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## **The Church is the body of Christ**

*A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 13th March 2005*

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free — and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honour to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will

show you the most excellent way. (1 Corinthians 12:12-31)

## **Introduction**

In 1 Corinthians chapters 12 to 14 the apostle Paul is dealing with the issue of spiritual gifts in the church. It would seem that some in the church in Corinth were abusing the gifts that they had received, and thought of them as a basis for pride and boasting. Some were "showing off" in meetings by exercising gifts in an inappropriate way, and some were dividing off from other believers on the basis of the gifts that they thought they had.

So Paul has to deal with abuses that were going on at Corinth. In the first half of chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians he warned the believers about counterfeit supernatural activity. Just because something might look supernatural it did not necessarily mean that it came from the Holy Spirit. The believers needed to test the claims of those who said they were exercising spiritual gifts. They also needed to remember that what we call "gifts of the Spirit" are actually gifts from all three Persons of the Godhead, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that these gifts are gifts of grace, not gifts given as a reward for merit. They also needed to remember that all the different gifts are given by the same Spirit, for the good of the whole church, given as the Holy Spirit decided. So there could be no pride or boasting in the matter of the spiritual gifts.

In the passage we are considering now, the apostle reinforces what he said earlier in the chapter, by speaking about the church as the body of Christ. Just as the human body is made up of many different parts, each of which has its own particular role to play, so the church, which is the body of Christ, is made up of many different people, each of whom is gifted in a different way, but each of whom has vital role to play.

We can divide the passage into the following sections:

1. All true believers have been supernaturally joined to the body of Christ, verses 12 – 13.
2. The "less gifted" members cannot say that they do not belong to the body of Christ, verses 14 – 20.
3. The "more gifted" members cannot say that they do not need the "less gifted" members, verses 21 – 26.

4. Different gifts are given to different members of the body of Christ, verses 27 – 31.

## **1. All true believers have been supernaturally joined to the body of Christ**

In verse 12 the apostle introduces the idea of the body, which controls much of what he says in this passage. He says, speaking about the human body, "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though its parts are many, they form one body." There are two words which summarise what he says: diversity and unity. There is diversity in the human body. There are many different parts, and each part is different from the other. The body has hands, feet, arms, legs, ears, eyes, a mouth, and internal organs such as lungs, intestines, a liver, kidneys, heart and so on. These various parts and organs are all different from each other. Yet each one has a vital role to play. And together all the different parts of the body make up one body.

"So", says the apostle, "it is with Christ." The church is the body of Christ. All the different believers are different from each other. Each one is gifted in a different way. Yet together they all make up one body, the church of Jesus Christ, and each person has a vital role to play within that body.

In verse 13 the apostle says that the way that we have become part of the church is through the supernatural work of God in our lives. "For we were all baptised by [or in] one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink." Jesus has baptised each believer in his Holy Spirit, with the result that we have been joined to his body, the church. The same thing has happened to all true believers. We were *all* baptised in *one* Spirit, all of us, whether we are Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, or, we may legitimately add, black or white, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, old or young, good looking or ugly – all true believers have been baptised in one Spirit into one body. And having been baptised in one Spirit, we have all been given the one Spirit to drink. The Holy Spirit is often likened in the Bible to water, which quenches thirst and gives strength. All true believers drink from the same fountain. There is not one supply for one, and another supply for another.

Some have seriously misunderstood the Bible's teaching on Holy Spirit baptism, especially during the last 50 years or so, and this has caused a lot of confusion and division in the church. Holy Spirit baptism has been presented by some as a second experience, subsequent to conversion, that you need to have in order to

be a really gifted and victorious Christian. Before you are baptised in the Spirit, it is said, you might be a Christian, and you might be going to heaven, but you will not have the power that you should have, nor the gifts. So you will be a defeated and ineffective Christian, until you have this extra experience of being baptised in the Holy Spirit. This teaching is inevitably divisive, as those who claim to have had this second experience will look down on those who do not claim to have had the second experience, and those who do not claim to have had it are tempted to feel inadequate and inferior.

However, the apostle makes clear in this passage that all true believers have been baptised in the Holy Spirit. In fact baptism in the Holy Spirit is equivalent to conversion. It is not an experience which follows on from conversion. And because all true believers have been baptised in the Holy Spirit, all are part of the body of Christ. There is no such thing as a Christian who has not been baptised in the Holy Spirit, and there is no such thing as a Christian who is not part of the body of Christ.

There are some very important lessons for us to draw from what the apostle says here. First of all, we see that to become part of the church of Jesus Christ a miracle has to take place. You have to be baptised by Jesus in the Holy Spirit. No man can do this. Only Jesus can. This is the great difference between the church and human organisations and societies. To join a human organisation all you have to do is fulfil the membership criteria, pay your subscription, turn up at the meetings, and you are in. To join the church it is not so simple. Jesus Christ himself must join you to his church by doing a miracle in you. Has this happened in your life? Have you been baptised in the Holy Spirit? Have you been born again? If not, you are not a member of the church of Jesus Christ. You have no part with him, and you are on your way to Hell. So if you have any doubt about this, ask Jesus to save you and to give you the Holy Spirit, and to make you a true Christian and part of his body.

The second lesson to draw from this is that if you are a Christian, you cannot avoid your responsibilities to the church of Jesus Christ. If you belong to Christ you also belong to his body, the church, whether you like it or not. You therefore must also accept other true believers as also being part of the body of Christ. And you must be involved in a local church. The universal church of Christ consists of all believers in all time and in all places who ever have believed and ever will believe in Christ. The universal church of Christ will never meet until that glorious day when Jesus comes again. But in the meantime Jesus does want

us to meet together, to love each other and to encourage each other. So he has arranged for there to be local expressions of his universal church, in the form of local church assemblies. Every true believer must meet with and be actively involved with a local church. Not to do so would be to deny the teaching of this passage about the fact that believers have been joined to the body of Christ.

## **2. The "less gifted" members of the body of Christ cannot say that they do not belong to the body**

Paul goes on to draw out the implications of what he has said. None of us can make a "Declaration of Independence" from the body of Christ. We all belong to the body. We have been joined to it by Christ, and even if we were to say that we do not belong to it, it would make no difference, because the Lord himself has joined us to it.

In verses 14 to 20 the apostle addresses those who might be tempted to think, and perhaps say, that because they had "few" gifts, they had no contribution to make to the body of Christ and so they do not belong to it. He says in verses 14 and 15, "Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body." The foot might say, "I am just a low down foot. What use is a foot: it is ugly, smelly, awkward. If only I were a hand, and could do all the clever things a hand could do." But the foot would not stop being part of the body just because it thought such a thing. Nor would it stop fulfilling a vital role. If a foot were able to cut itself off from the body, the body to which it had been attached would be much weaker.

Sometimes believers speak in a similar way. They say, "I am not gifted. I am no use. There is no point in my being involved in the church. I have nothing to give. I am going to keep away." If you think that way you have swallowed a lie from the devil. If you are a Christian you have a vital role to fulfil that only you can fulfil. And in any case, you *are* part of the body of Christ, whether you like it or not, because Christ has joined you to his church. Your saying that you do not belong makes not the slightest difference.

Similarly, the apostle says in verse 16, "And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body." The same reasoning applies. Just because someone says he is not part of the body, he does not stop being part, because Christ has joined him

to the church.

The apostle then goes on in verse 17 to speak of how the different parts of the body are all needed. "If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?" It is absurd to imagine a body which was made up of one big eyeball, or one massive ear. The brilliance of the design of the human body is seen in the way all the different organs are fitted together. "But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body." (verses 18 – 20). What is true for the human body is true for the church as well. God has arranged all the different parts of the church, so that each part may fulfil its function. The very diversity of the functions of the body of Christ is what gives it its strength.

What lesson can we learn from this section? Simply this: if you are a true Christian, you are a member of the body of Christ, and you do have a vital role to play. You must not withdraw from the church on some false grounds of being too limited in your gifts. Your gifts may be "unspectacular" and they may not be gifts which are publicly exercised. They are still vital for the health of the church.

### **3. The "more gifted" members cannot say that they do not need the "less gifted" members**

In verses 21 to 26 Paul turns his attention to the "more gifted" members of the church, some of whom might in their arrogance think that they do not need the "less gifted" members. "The eye cannot say to the hand 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!'. The eye is a highly sophisticated part of the body, performing a very intelligent function. If it could reason it might say to itself, "I am far superior to the hand, which only carries out very basic functions. I am the means by which the whole body sees. I can do without the hand." If it were to think this way it would be very mistaken, as the hand is vital for many tasks. It may indeed be less sophisticated than the eye, but it nonetheless is very important. Again, the head is a very sophisticated part of the body, but it cannot say of the feet "I do not need you." The head needs the feet, just as the feet need the head.

So it is with the body of Christ. Some parts of the body of Christ perform very "sophisticated" and "clever" functions, others perform more "basic" and

"ordinary" functions, but all the different parts are still important.

Moreover those parts of the human body which appear to be weaker and less presentable actually fulfil a very important function. As the apostle says in verses 22 to 24, "those parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment." There are certain parts of our bodies that we would never allow to be seen in public. Yet if we did not have those parts the human race would die out in one generation. So it is that some members of the body of Christ would rather die than stand in front of a church and speak publicly. But those same members can fulfil very important roles, much better than preachers, for example by visiting the sick and doing practical jobs for the housebound.

The apostle says in verse 24 that "God has combined the parts of the body and has given greater honour to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that his parts should have equal concern for each other." We tend to give honour to those who have a public ministry, such as preaching and teaching, but on the final day there will be some surprises. Jesus said that "the last will be first and the first will I be last" (Matthew 20.16). There will no doubt be many who had very public gifts who will be on the "back row" in glory, while there will be many others who served Christ in a very quiet and unobtrusive way who will be given prominence at the resurrection. And God has done things this way "so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other." We should value and honour each other and show concern for each other, because each member of the body, however insignificant he or she might appear to be, is a valuable member who performs a vital role. We are all dependent on each other. "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part is honoured with it." (verse 26)

So the great lesson of this section is this: do not look down on other believers that you consider to be "less gifted" than yourself. You need your brothers and sisters, and they are performing a vital role in the church. Honour them and encourage them.

#### **4. Different gifts are given to different members of the body of Christ**

In verse 27 the apostle reiterates what he has said so far in this passage. "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." Collectively we form the body of Christ. Each one of us, with our differing gifts, is a part of that body. The different gifts have been appointed by God. "And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues (or languages)." There are differing views among believers as to which of these gifts were given for the apostolic age and which continue for all the age of the church. I am not going to address this issue here. The point to learn from what the apostle says, however, is that the differing gifts are given as God has appointed, not as men have decided. This is a point that the apostle has emphasised again and again in this chapter.

Moreover, we are all gifted in different ways. This is brought out very clearly by the series of questions in verses 29 and 30. "Are all apostles?" Clearly the answer is "No". "Are all prophets?" No. "Are all teachers?" No. "Do all work miracles?" No. "Do all have gifts of healing?" No. "Do all speak in tongues (or languages)?" No. "Do all interpret?" No.

This is important, because there are those who say some gifts, and particularly the gift of tongues, are for all believers, and that if you do not have this gift then you must be lacking in faith or being disobedient. But we see here that the apostle explicitly says that there is not one gift that every believer has, apart from of course the gift of salvation itself. There is a great variety in the different gifts that have been given to the church.

## **Conclusion**

This is a very important passage of Scripture. Many Christians fail to live as they should because they do not know this passage, or if they do know it, they fail to live in the light of it. Here are some lessons we should take from this passage and apply to ourselves:

1. We need to make sure that we really are Christians, that we have been "baptised in the Holy Spirit", because only by this miracle can we become part of the church and have a place in the new heaven and the new earth which God will make.
2. We must realise that if we are converted we are part of the body of



Christ. There is no such thing as a Christian who is not part of the church.

3. We need to express our commitment to the universal body of Christ by being committed to a local church. We need to come regularly to the meetings of the church, and be involved in its life and service.

4. If you think you are not very gifted, do not cut yourself off from the church. You have a vital role to play, even if your contribution will not be as public as some people's.

5. If you think you are gifted, do not despise others whom you think are less gifted than you. Value them as fellow members of the body of Christ, and encourage them.

6. Look for ways where you can use your gifts for the good of the church, both within the main meetings of the church and also through serving other believers outside the meetings of the church.

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