

The Difference Between a Body and a Club

1 Corinthians 12:4-18

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July 25, 2010

We speak of the church as the body of Christ so commonly that we no longer feel the force of that metaphor. Certainly there are moments like the church fair yesterday when almost every member of the church is functioning in some way, cooperatively, and we might think to ourselves, “Wow, so this is what it means to be a body!” We’ll have another such moment very soon when Vacation Bible School arrives and we need just as many members as possible to function using their own gifts to minister to children.

But when you think of everybody so busy yesterday scurrying around, a more apt comparison might be to an ant hill or a beehive. Lots of little guys running around doing their assigned jobs. And the human virtue that this calls for is cooperation.

In looking over my old sermons on this text I discovered a contrast between a sumo church and a football church. I grew up playing sumo in Japan, where you would just take a rope or garden hose and make a circle, do a little stomping around, and try to knock the other guy out of the circle. When I moved to America in the 8th grade I had to learn football, which was much more complicated and involved groups of people agreeing to move in the same direction. In a sumo church one fat guy draws a circle and says, “This is *my* church,” and the other fat guy says, “This is *my* church.” In Japan, the referee in sumo is a priest, and it’s not so different in the church version. The two fat guys slap at each other until one of them is pushed out or just walks away. In the football church everyone understands that it is a team sport and the point is to go somewhere. There is a clear goal. Yes, there is a quarterback, but every player has an assignment.

So you can read Paul’s letters about the church as the body of Christ to mean simply that we are all on the same team, that we need to work together. You could call the church the “club of Christ” and make the same point, if the point is that we are all members of one organization and need to cooperate. But Paul seems to be after something more. He was addressing a church fight in Corinth, and he could have made his appeal to the church by talking about the ethical virtue of cooperation. When Nathan was a very little guy, big sister Sarah used to say to him, “Cooperation, it’s cool. It’s the big-boy thing to do.” Paul could have said the same sort of thing. But he goes beyond that to speak to the question of identity—who we *are* as the church. We are not just one more social organization formed by voluntary association. We are the body of Christ formed by God’s miraculous action in saving us and bringing us together. It is God’s Spirit who gives us the abilities we need to work together to accomplish Christ’s purposes. This is something supernatural and mystical, not just a matter of making up our minds to do it. It’s not just a virtue; it’s who we really are. We are not just individuals any more: we are the people of God and the body of Christ.

In American life, we are so oriented toward individual choice and free association that our natural tendency is to think of the church as a club. We Baptists were born out of a reaction against churches that demanded conformity and used the power of the government against those with other religious opinions, so we placed extra stress on the freedom of choice—and we fit right in with American notions of democracy. But the early Baptists were still very clear that while a regenerate church—a church composed of those who have been born again—requires that each member make a free choice to follow Jesus, the church is a *body* bound together in a covenant, sharing a common life—not just a club of those sharing the same opinions.

I want to highlight this morning four truths that come from the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ and from 1 Corinthians 12, four truths that will spell out the difference between being a club and being a body.

1. Christ's life is in us. This one is so obvious that we can miss it. To say that we are the body of Christ is to say that the life that is in us is the very life of Christ. When we become Christians by faith, we receive the gift of life, eternal life. That doesn't mean that we receive a ticket to heaven, to life there. It means that we were basically dead spiritually and we have been made alive. The way that happens is that the very life of Jesus Christ is put in us. As Paul puts it in Galatians 2:20, "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me, and the life that I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis compares this to "a good infection," where the life of Jesus gets into us and gradually takes over our bodies. We might use the image of modern genetic manipulation in which the DNA of an embryo is taken out and replaced by the DNA of another organism, and the whole organizing principle of the growing embryo becomes the life of the DNA donor.

So when we talk about the being the body of Christ we mean that the life of the church is the risen Jesus himself made present through his Spirit. This is not just true of us as individuals, but of us as a group. In a club the only life that is present is the life that the members bring to the meetings and activities. But in the body of Christ there is a supernatural life that flows through us and empowers us. We are not dependent, ultimately, on our own abilities or our own strength, but on Christ working through us as a church. That's our hope: not that we can get better organized, not that we can recruit younger people with more physical energy, not that we can raise more money—but that we will get out of the way of the life of Jesus that wants to flow among us and through us to other people.

2. We are connected and interdependent. This is the clear meaning of Paul's teaching about the body here in 1 Corinthians 12, in Romans 12, and in Ephesians 4. Just as the organs of the human body share a life and so are connected, we who are members of the body of Christ share a life and are connected. We forget, I think, that the word "member" originally meant "body part." To be a member of the church originally meant to be a toe, a liver, an eyeball in the body of Christ. What sense would it be for a body to be all eyes? What sense would it make for an eyeball to say, "I don't need the rest of the body, I think I'll go live on my own"?

And yet because we think about the church as if it were a club, we think that we can decide to quit whenever we get offended. A part of the body can't quit; it can only die, and leave the rest of the body forever handicapped. But the individualism in our culture is so focused on me-me-me and what I want out of an organization that we bring that to church. This has been going on for a long time. Back in 1985 the sociologist Robert Bellah and his team wrote *Habits of the Heart* in which they showed that the notion of an individualized and personalized church was in full bloom. Bellah coined the term "Sheilaism" after a woman named Sheila who interviewed who said, "I believe in God. I am not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice." Bellah cited a Gallup poll in which 80 percent of American's agreed with the statement that "an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any churches or synagogues." In a lecture, Bellah said, "Now that's isn't the way it really happens...but the notion that religious belief ought to be a purely internal thing and then you go to a church or synagogue of your choice shows how deeply ingrained a kind of religious privatism is, which turns the church into something like the Kiwanis Club or some other kind of voluntary association that you go to or not if you feel comfortable with it—but which has no organic claim on you."

What we miss is that God's purpose in the world has always been to create a people for himself. First it was Israel, and now it is the church. His purpose was never just to save individuals one by one

but to create a people that would embody his life, his love, and his purposes. Peter says to the church, “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.” And so we are connected in the most profound way—as parts of a body sharing one life, controlled by Jesus, who is the brains of this outfit. He is the brain telling us when to move and making us work together and his Spirit is something like the blood flowing among us keeping us alive with his life.

3. We are different from one another. Paul makes a big deal about this: we have different abilities or gifts and that’s the way God wants it. God doesn’t want sameness; God wants variety. Look at the way he made the world. During the BioBlitz a few weeks ago the naturalists visiting the island found over 1000 species in a few acres of the Lapham Farm. So we should expect variety in the church.

In a club people usually join because they are alike—they share the same interests or opinions or social status. But in a church we can have widely differing interests and opinions and social status and still be one in Christ. It doesn’t matter, Paul says, if we are slaves or free people, what ethnic group we are from, what economic status—the Spirit has baptized us all into one body. In the church in Corinth they were experiencing divisions and breaking up into cliques. The scholar Gordon Fee, who has written the biggest fattest commentary on 1 Corinthians, says, “This was the Corinthian error, to think that conformity was a value, or that it represents true spirituality.”

Being a body means that difference is a value. The Spirit says “Vive les differences.” Have you heard of “the strengths movement” in management literature? It’s been a popular trend over the last decade, spearheaded by Marcus Buckingham in a series of books, beginning with *Now, Discover Your Strengths*. The basic argument is this: “The great organization must not only accommodate the fact that each employee is different, but it must capitalize on the differences.” This is business learning from the church.

Buckingham’s work is based on a long-term Gallup study of 2 million people which found that in most organizations that don’t function well there were two false assumptions:

1. Each person can learn to be competent in almost anything.
2. Each person’s greatest room for growth is in his/her areas of greatest weakness.

The very best managers operate from two different assumptions:

1. Each person’s talents [gifts] are enduring and unique.
2. Each person’s greatest room for growth is in the areas of his/her greatest strengths.

What this is reminding the church is that each person in the church is given one or more gifts on which the success of the whole body depends. The church is one big Gifted and Talented class. There is no one here who is not Gifted and Talented. The Spirit does not make us more alike but more different. What you need to do is not to become like me or anyone else in the church, but to become more like you—to use your gift and develop it by exercising it. Our success as a body depends on every body part functioning as that body part is designed to function—not becoming alike in any way but functioning with all the differences in tact and celebrated.

4. Our purpose is Christ’s purpose. If we are Christ’s body, we don’t have to think about what our purpose is. We exist to do what Jesus did when he had a physical body and we exist to do what the risen and glorified Christ directs us to do through his Spirit. We do not have our own purpose as a church. We are looking to understand the mind of Christ. When Baptist churches first developed the practice of allowing all the members to consider an issue before the church, it was not because they wanted to be democratic. It was because they understood that every person had the Holy Spirit living in them and the best way for the church to discern the mind of Christ—what Christ wants in any particular situation—was for all the members together to pray and listen to what Jesus was saying to them through the Spirit.

If the church is Christ's body, the church can never be about what *we* want to do. It's not a matter of our tastes or our traditions or getting our own needs met. The church is about doing what Christ wants us to do. He's the brains, we are the extended body parts through which he touches the world. Teresa of Avila said that very clearly over 500 years ago:

No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.