

Membership: In the Body of Christ; In the Local Church

Introduction – Jesus Christ says that we are His body. Certainly He is referring to the whole church over the whole history of the world, for elsewhere we are told there is just one body. But how are we to understand as well that the body of Christ is here, in a local congregation?

Members of A Body (1 Cor 12:12-27) – Paul is writing to a specific local church (1:2) which he started years before. He admonishes them because of the schisms which are tearing this church apart (ch's 1-3). When we get to chapter 12, Paul is arguing for the church to understand its unity and diversity like members of a human body.

We are the body, of which Christ is the Head (v12); and our union is so organic, so true, that Paul says there, “*so also is Christ.*” This union takes place through the baptism of the Holy Spirit (v13), and the implications of this body-like connection are described in detail through the rest of the chapter.

Universal and Local – The declaration that we are “one body” should be understood both universally and locally. In verse 20, Paul makes the universal statement “*but now indeed there are many members, yet one body.*” In verse 27, applying to the problem at hand in the local church, Paul says to them, “*Now you are the body of Christ.*” It is not an either-or proposition, but a both-and. We are members of the body of Christ *catholic*, and we are reckoned members of the body of Christ with regard to a local fellowship.

The Absurdity of Individualism (vv14-19) – If your hand said, “I don’t really need to be formally connected to the rest of the body. I can just be a hand all to myself,” we wouldn’t think twice about calling that ridiculous. Yet that is just the way many individual members act. We see faults in that forearm that we have to be connected to in order to be in the body, and so we think it is healthier for us to remain unconnected. We forget what the Head has promised He is doing, both to the forearm and to the hand (Eph 4:11-16). God, by His Spirit, through His appointed means, the church, is causing you, the imperfect hand, to be knit together perfectly – and He intends to use that imperfect forearm to do so.

The Necessity of Diversity – The way of a human body is the way of the body of Christ. There are different members with differing gifts (vv4-11 earlier, then vv17-18). This means that individuals will have different strengths and weaknesses. They will have different storehouses full of things to contribute, and storehouses empty and in need to be filled in order to function. When the members come together, they become far more than the sum of their parts. When they remain disconnected, even what they are is taken away.

Who’s Who? (Heb 13:7, 17) – God has provided a means of protecting us from our sinful tendencies to individualism, and it is the structure of the local church. At the local church level, the body of Christ is to operate with real names. This is not to deny the truth of the catholic Church nor encourage schisms. When obediently followed, the church is the place to foster true fellowship (partnership-koinonia) both locally, and with the greater church.

Known Elders – The members are to know who their elders are; men they have themselves given approval to rule and watch over their souls. They are to consider the outcome of their conduct, learning from their teaching and from their lives how to worship, study, love, forgive, submit, long-suffer, strive, serve, lead – how to live.

Known Congregants – The elders will be called to give an account of the souls of the particular local body where they serve. Peter says, “*Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not....as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock...* (1 Pet 5:2-3).” God intends to provide very personal care for you and your family, and He intends to use the elders of His church to do so. Taken rightly, this should leave the elders feeling quite sober, even overwhelmed, and so the writer of Hebrews adds, “*Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.*”

“Let all things be done decently and in order” (1 Cor 14:40) – In the areas of corporate worship (the immediate context of this verse) and the corporate community of worshippers (identifiable people who are to hear particular instructions), we are told to do things with order. This requires that we develop an agreed upon understanding of who the worshippers are (members) and how we are to interact (membership). Hence, membership in a local church.

Beating Individualism – Is it possible that there exists a besetting sin of individualism throughout our land that has been in our ‘atmosphere’ so long we cannot detect it? Is it possible that our skepticism towards institutions has, in the case of the church, sometimes made us lonelier than we realize? How do we beat it?

Don’t Dance Around; Jump In – If you are a member of the body of Christ, then identify yourself as such.

Act Like A Calvinist – He or she is one who believes that God is sovereign over everything, including leading him or her to this imperfect congregation, imperfect leadership, and imperfect fellowship to accomplish His perfect plans. He probably even has particular callings for you here to serve all those imperfect others in your midst.

Corporate Worship/Corporate Service – We are certainly called to our personal devotions. But the body of Christ can’t dance if the foot isn’t here; it cannot sing if the tongue stays home; it cannot hear if the ear decides to go fishing instead. The effect upon our corporate worship is greater than we realize when we take our attendance here lightly. And what did Jesus really mean when He said, “*...inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me* (Matt 25:31-40)?”