

The Church is a Body

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[0 : 00] This morning we are going to continue a series that we've been doing mainly in the evening services about the church.

For the past two Sunday evening services we've been looking at the way in which the New Testament teaches us about the church by using various different images.

This week we're swapping things around and we're looking at this service in the morning and then for the next two weeks we'll return to the evening. The images that we're looking at are as follows. First of all we looked at the church as a pillar. Last week we looked at the church as a farm. Today we're going to look at the church as a body and then over the next two weeks we'll look at the church as a mother and as the church as a bride.

We read from 1 Corinthians chapter 12 and we'll be referring back to that passage several times during the sermon but I want us to turn initially just now to Colossians chapter 1 and I'm going to read verses 15 to 18.

[1 : 02] This is speaking of Jesus. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities.

All things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things and in him all things hold together. 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. These verses and the passage that we read in 1 Corinthians 12 are two examples of several passages in the New Testament that use the image of a body to describe the nature and functioning of the church.

That's a very powerful image for us but it's also a very simple and accessible one for us. Paul is saying, if you look at your own body, the way in which it's made up of lots of different parts, that is teaching you about the church.

There's a huge amount for us to learn here and it's a subject that in many ways we could spend many weeks on. We'll only just scratch the surface today but I want us just to focus on two things as we think about the church as a body.

[2 : 20] Number one, we're going to look at the importance of each part and number two, we're going to look at the unity of the whole. So first of all, the importance of each part in that body.

The passage we read in 1 Corinthians 12 uses the image of the body to highlight the important contribution that each member makes to the church.

As we said when we were reading the context behind that letter was division and Paul is trying to teach them that they are all important and they shouldn't be separating into factions or groups but rather they need to work together as one.

In thinking about that I want to just highlight four things very briefly. Number one, individuality. So one of the great truths emphasized by the body imagery is that as individual members of the church we are different.

Now when I'm saying that it's important to emphasize that in terms of what we believe we are not to be different, we are to be the same. There's one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

[3 : 38] What we believe about God, what we believe about morality, what we believe about sin must all be the same. We must never, ever turn to a different gospel. But in terms of what you and I contribute to the church we are absolutely meant to be different.

Each part makes a unique contribution. And that's a very important thing to remember because there's a couple of dangers that can arise here.

First of all, as individuals in the church it's very easy to look around and think to ourselves I'm not like them so maybe I don't belong.

We could think I'm not confident, I'm not good looking, I'm not a successful professional, I'm not married, I'm not musical, I'm not funny, I'm not cool.

All of these things can make us feel intimidated or out of place. And we are being reminded with the imagery of the body that none of these things for one second, no matter what you feel you're not, none of these things mean that you are not a crucial, precious and brilliant part of the church.

[4 : 54] Paul uses this body imagery to make it absolutely clear that differences do not diminish our status, value or identity as part of Christ's church.

We read that, he said if the foot should say because I'm not a hand I don't belong to the body that would not make it any less part of the body. And it's exactly the same for an ear comparing itself with an eye.

In other words, if you are united to Jesus Christ by trusting in him it is theologically impossible for you to be less a part of the body than anyone else.

So here's a list of people that we would say are crucial parts of the church, historically and even in contemporary times. The Apostle Paul, St. Augustine, John Calvin, Thomas Chalmers, John Piper, Tim Keller, and the space is for you.

Individually we must remember that we're meant to be different. The second danger is that as a group we can sometimes look at other groups or other people and think they're not like us so they don't belong.

[6 : 16] And so that's almost like the opposite problem of feeling insecure ourselves. We can look at others and feel they don't seem to fit with us.

And our instinctive reaction can be, well, maybe they don't belong with us, they're too different. Now, unless they believe a different gospel then we have to confess that to think like that is totally wrong.

We must never, ever think that certain types of people don't belong in church. It's so easy to have a kind of face doesn't fit mentality.

It's really easy to think this person is going to give us problems. I remember that happening to me in a certain context where I was going to be serving. There was somebody there and somebody had said to me, oh, that person is going to give you a lot of problems.

Do you know that person was just a legend in terms of helping and serving and supporting. But we can have that mindset that they're not like us.

[7 : 22] Of course, that kind of thinking is totally worldly and it's unacceptable. In terms of our individuality, the one thing that we've got in common is that we're all broken and the biblical truth is that underneath that brokenness lies someone incredibly special, precious and useful.

So we're being reminded important things about individuality. Second thing that I want to highlight is that the body image of us speaks about capability. So individuality is number one, capability number two.

The whole body figure of speech is very functional language. Paul emphasised that every part has a use. 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? This principle that each part has its own capabilities is tied in with the New Testament concept of spiritual gifts.

You see that mentioned in various places, a good example is Romans 12, again using the body imagery. For as in one body we have many, many members and the members do not have the same function.

[8 : 34] So we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually members of one another, having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.

This is a great reminder that although no one has every spiritual gift, every single Christian has some. That means that whoever you are, no matter how weak or useless you feel, no matter how many times you've tried to do stuff and it's not gone very well, no matter how many times you feel like you just can't do it, it is a theological fact that you have gifts making you capable to serve as part of Christ's church.

That means that the stumbling block to you serving is never that you don't have gifts. The stumbling block is that sometimes we don't use them as we should. Hence Paul's command, let us use them.

Now sometimes that can be because of lack of confidence. We just struggle to step forward. Sometimes it can be because we're too busy. Sometimes very often it's because of bad leadership in the church, not delegating or giving people opportunities, not giving people opportunities. We need to remember these things. We need to think about them. It's all an example of why it's important that theology shapes our thinking.

[10:04] So your feelings might say, I can't. Your schedule might say, I can't. Other people might say, you can't. Somebody says, you can.

We have gifts where we can serve. Thirdly, I want to think about compatibility. So we have individuality, capability, compatibility.

This body imagery also appears in Ephesians chapter 4. Here Paul highlights that everything works as it fits together. So Ephesians 4, 15 to 16. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head into Christ, from whom the whole body joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

The great reminder, this is a great reminder of the fact that all the different parts of the body are compatible with one another. The key truth has been emphasized is that the differences we have, differences in terms of personality, giftings, capabilities, they don't make us incompatible. They actually make us compatible. It's the differentness of all the people in the church that's key to making it work well.

[11:28] And that makes perfect sense if you just look at your own body. So by hands can grab stuff. My nose can smell. My ears can hear. My kidneys can clean. My heart can pump. My legs can run.

And it's the differentness of it all that makes it work. So in a church like ours, one person maybe has two or three or four particular capabilities.

Together, we have about a thousand when we add it all up. And that's brilliant because it means that when you're confronted by something that you really struggle to do, whether that's mentoring somebody who's a new Christian or whether it's dealing with finance and accounting things, whether it's complying with charity regulation, whether it's learning a new song, whether it's dealing with helping and supporting children's work, whether it's answering a question that you find difficult, if you can't do it, there will be someone else in the church who probably can.

Often we're finding ourselves in situations where we think, well, I can't do it. The answer in that situation is to go to the church and find a brother or sister who can.

And all of this is a reason why it is so important to look for the best in one another.

[12:47] That's a crucial New Testament emphasis. Paul says that, do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility, count others more significant than yourselves.

Now, when I read a verse like that, I find it really easy to think, yeah, other people should think better of me. Of course, that's the wrong way around, isn't it?

We should think the best of others. So often we focus on people's failings and weaknesses. So often people have insecurities that make them do things that we wish they didn't, and yet we just pounce on that and highlight that and know our way at that.

The New Testament imperative is to be the other way around. Because if we look at the worst, for the worst in people, we're going to miss a huge amount of potential in Christ's church. So when you look at others, especially when they disappoint you or frustrate you, always ask the question, what is brilliant about this person?

So the importance of each part, we have individuality, capability, compatibility. The last thing is dependence. All of these points regarding the church as a body is emphasizing the fact that we are dependent on each other.

[14:11] Paul makes that brilliantly clear. He says, the I cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you. Nor again, the head to the feet, I have no need of you.

All this means that there are two key truths that I want you to remember in regard to your place in the church. Number one, you are always needed in the church.

Number two, you are always needing the church. Needed and needing.

These are two theological facts that we must never forget. And it's a great reminder that Christianity will simultaneously humble you like nothing else and yet at the same time show you how incredibly special you are.

So the picture of the church as a body teaches us about the importance of each part. Secondly, it teaches us about the unity of the whole.

[15 : 22] So you can look at your body, you can see hands and arm and shoulders and knees and all these different things, loads and loads and loads of different parts and yet it's still one united body.

And the church of Jesus Christ is exactly the same. Although it has many parts, many members, it is a single united body. There is only one church.

And that also has very important implications for us and there's two things I want to highlight under this heading. Number one, the health of a part affects the health of the whole.

The health of the part affects the health of a whole. Just like in your own body, it only takes one part of your body to be injured or to be ill for that to affect the whole body.

So a good example of it is sportsman, you think of a footballer with a broken toe, he's still an injured footballer and the health of that toe is affecting the whole health of that player.

[16 : 31] Now this means that in the Christian church, the health of a part affects the health of the whole. So that means that when you are casual about your own health, you hurt others.

Now, we face a big danger just now in the church because of the age in which we live in and the danger is that we can think that the individualism of the culture around us also applies to the church.

So in practical terms, that can mean that we can think, well, if I compromise on something in my spiritual life, it's only going to affect me and sometimes we can almost have a sort of self-loathing that almost motivates us to do that and we can think, well, it's only going to hurt me and I deserve it anyway.

The body imagery used in the New Testament reminds us that that's not true. If I am casual about my own spiritual health, it will not simply affect me, it will affect others and it will hurt others.

And the reason for that is because sin is never individualistic. Now that's a very, very important thing to remember. So yes, sin is selfish.

[17 : 56] It's putting ourselves first, it's doing stuff that we want and it's disregarding other people. It's selfish, but sin is not individualistic in the sense that sin will not just harm you, it will harm other people as well.

And that's one of the hideous things about sin. It pulls people in, even when they have done absolutely nothing to deserve it. And you see examples of that everywhere in our own lives.

And so we have to think about this, the fact that my spiritual health, if I'm casual about that, it risks hurting others. So we can think of a few examples about this.

And these are things that I've come across in my own experience and maybe even been guilty of myself. For example, you may go out of a weekend and have too much to drink.

And in that context, somebody else in the church, maybe somebody who's thinking about going to church, thinking about the impact of his life, might look at you and think, well, it's obviously perfectly okay for Christians to get drunk.

[19 : 05] And your carelessness with your own health has risked their health. Another example would be if you're very harsh and aggressive at work, your colleagues might think, this is a church guy and he's behaving like this, he's horrible.

Why would I want to be part of that? And so your carelessness has hurt the church in that regard. Maybe it's even just coming to church each week, you might sort of not do it so much.

And the person who really looks for your friendship and welcome every week is left wondering, why doesn't this person want to be here anymore? Is it something that I've done?

Same when we gossip, when we're impatient, when we're critical, when we're jealous, we hurt other people. So my health affects the health of the whole.

And I know that I have done things that on the surface probably look like they just affect me, but yet in reality have hurt other people.

[20 : 07] Now, I feel reluctant saying all that because it's a very kind of, I don't, I'm not saying it to be harsh or depressing or to hammer you at all. I just think that this is one of the key truths been set before us with the body imagery that we have to remember that sin is not individualistic.

And maybe just by remembering that, it'll give us the strength we need to say no to temptation when sin is in front of us.

So it's the case that when you're casual about your own health, you can hurt other people. Equally, when we mistreat others, we actually hurt ourselves at the same time.

And so the unity of the church body means that if we are inappropriate to other people, we'll actually end up hurting ourselves. A very clear example of this is when church discipline is handled badly. So sometimes people make mistakes, sometimes people make huge mistakes. But when that happens, we need to respond in a biblical way.

[21 : 22] Often we can make a mistake of forgetting grace, but we need to work to ensure that we're comforting people, encouraging people, and bringing them back to a place of repentance and restoration.

The goal of every act of church discipline is to bring people to restoration. Sometimes we risk, when we treat people harshly, we can risk leaving everybody around us looking at us thinking, why are you so different to Jesus?

And it's just a reminder of the care and protection that we need to show towards one another. Now I think Paul illustrates this for us in 1 Corinthians 12, and we'll look at these verses together.

He says, on the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable. And on the parts of the body that we think less honorable, we show the greater honor. And the unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which are more presentable parts do not require.

But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it. Now this is a bit of an unusual point that Paul is making, and I'm a little bit nervous going into these verses, partly because of the kind of language that's been used, and partly because I hope that I'm not stretching things too far with my interpretation.

[22 : 59] So in what I'm about to say, this is just a stimulate thought. And you don't necessarily have to agree with me. But I think that this is where Paul is going.

So Paul talks about unpresentable parts. So roll up your sleeves and let's think about this. So some parts of your body are used for going to the toilet, yes?

These parts of the body are to do with the most unpleasant parts of body functioning, yes? Okay? And we would agree with that.

So these are the kind of bits to do with the yuck and the mess of life. And yet these parts of the body, we treat with extra special care.

So I don't mind if my arms are exposed, don't mind if my face is exposed, I seriously mind if other things are exposed.

[24 : 06] And so the awkward, embarrassing, yucky parts are protected. In fact, they're given the greatest honor, aren't they?

Now, the point I think that we can make here, and again, I'm just putting this before you to think about, this is not necessarily going to go into my systematic theology if I ever write it.

Not that I'll ever write one, I wouldn't, but the only person who would read it would be my mother. So the point is this, if somebody in the church falls into muck spiritually, if they make a mistake that is awkward, embarrassing, inappropriate, I think we're being told to treat that part of the body with special care until it is presentable again.

In other words, we are to honor the un-presentable mucky part. Now, that does not mean glorying in sin. That does not mean that we're saying, oh, someone sins, it's great, oh, look, they're sin, fantastic, it's wonderful.

I'm not saying that at all. What I think it's saying is that when we deal with brokenness and sin, when that is recognized in the person who sinned more than anybody else, when they are repentant and broken because of the mistake that they've made, we need to look after them in a way that does not shame them and that doesn't humiliate them, but in a way that cares for them and thus shows them honor.

[25 : 51] And that's because when a Christian badly mucks up, it's our body that's injured, not there, ours.

And that's why the goal of all discipline is restoration. That makes perfect sense if you think about your own body. If your hand is hurt for whatever reason, whether that was an accident, whether it was neglected, whether it was something incredibly stupid that you did, whatever reason it is, if your hand is hurt, are you going to respond to that by being rough with it?

Are you going to heal a cut by adding a bruise? Of course not. If your hand is hurt, what do you tend to do with it? You pull it in and you hold it until it's better.

And in that process, you try to learn from the mistake that you've made and we work towards restoration. And that's why we need to watch how our actions affect our own health and how our actions can affect the health of others.

And this is where we see that what Paul writes, it makes so much sense because in chapter three of Colossians, he says, put to death, therefore, what is earthly and new, sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness, which is idolatry.

[27 : 12] On account of these, the wrath of God is coming. In these, you once walked when you were living in them, but now you must put them all away, anger, wrath, malice, slander and obscene talk from your mouth.

These are all means of hurting each other, aren't they? You do all of those things, you're going to hurt yourself or hurt someone else.

And instead, we are to put on as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, bearing with one another.

And if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other, as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these, put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony and let the peace of Christ ruin your hearts to which indeed you are called in one body.

And be thankful. These are truths that we need to write on our hearts because the health of a part affects the health of a whole.

[28 : 22] Finally I want to say that the experience of a part is the experience of the whole. So yes, the health of a part affects the health of the whole, but the final thing I want to just look at is the fact that an experience of a part is the experience of the whole.

The body imagery is telling us that as a united whole, the experience of each part should be shared. Paul gives us two clear examples of that in 1 Corinthians 12, suffering and rejoicing.

If one member suffers, all suffer together. If one member is honored, all rejoice together. As a united body, the church should share sufferings and should share rejoicings.

And yet it is often the case that sometimes we don't do either of these. Sometimes we struggle to suffer together. That can be because we're too proud to show our weaknesses.

Now I am guilty of that. I am weak, the last thing I want to do is to tell you all we want to hide our weaknesses.

[29 : 32] Or it can be because we're reluctant to involve ourselves in other people's mess and so we want to avoid people. So when it comes to our sin and failings, we hide it. When it comes to other people's sins, we can't stop looking at it and can't get past the fact that it's there.

And of course these are the very opposites of the New Testament imperatives. When it comes to our own sin, we should confess and acknowledge it. When it comes to other people's sin, we should forgive it and forget.

Equally, we can be guilty of not rejoicing together. So instead of the honoring of one part giving us joy, we can sometimes be jealous, critical, even defensive.

And I've been guilty of this myself because you remember kind of early in my ministry, and I've been a minister for five years now, and I remember in my first year or two, you would be working away and your church would be more or less the same size all the time.

And you'd hear of your colleague whose church is growing and growing and you're like, what's wrong with me? That's the instinctive reaction.

[30 : 52] Instead of rejoicing, you're resenting, which is bonkers, and yet it's something that we're prone to do. And the body image, imagery in the New Testament, should prevent us from thinking like that because as one united body, blessing, success, and joy for a part is impossible to separate from the whole.

It cannot be separated from it. As Paul says in chapter three, we're called to one body. The whole structure is designed around togetherness. So if the church gets stronger in Charlotte Chapel or Chambers or Cornerstone or Carlyway or Kalanish or Castletown or Chile or China, then all of that means that theologically we are stronger too.

And that's brilliant, and that should thrill us. As a united body, we suffer together and we rejoice together.

There's a final point that arises out of all of this that we need to make. I think I just did the classic pre-church thing of doing a final point and then another final point.

But anyway, please, you've been very patient. I want to make this final point because it is actually the most important point of all.

[32 : 14] The emphasis of the unity of the whole doesn't simply mean that we're connected to one another. It also means that in all of these ways, we are connected to Jesus.

That's the great point that is made in Colossians chapter one regarding the church body image. The head of that body is Jesus.

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.

As head, Jesus is Lord of the church. That means that he's the one in authority. He's the firstborn who is in that position of privilege and ownership.

The church belongs to him. We might even say, when we think of Jesus as the head of the church, I think we could even say in our own kind of modern language, we could say Jesus is the brains of the church.

[33 : 10] He's the intellectual and strategic authority in the church. That's why we must never add our own ideas as to what the church should be like.

That was one of the key issues lying behind the letter that Paul wrote to the Colossians. You'll see as you read through it. Paul says, don't listen to these people who are saying, don't eat.

Don't do this. Don't do that. They were bringing their own ideas to the church. Paul is saying, no, Jesus is the head. He is the one in authority. He is the brains behind the church.

Our job is to listen to what he has said in his word. Jesus is Lord of the church. As head, Jesus is also the life of the church.

If you look at your body, I hope that none of us experiences, but you can live without your foot, live without your leg, but you can't live without your head.

[34 : 08] Our body is totally dependent on our head for life in exactly the same way. The life of the church is utterly dependent on its connection to Jesus.

He's the beginning. He's the life giver. He's the one who nourishes and energizes the church. He is the one on whom we completely depend for life. Even we can think that a church is dead if it's not doing activities, if it's not engaged with culture, if the singing is poor, if the decor is old.

These things are important, but they are not what makes a church dead. What makes a church dead is if it loses its connection to Jesus.

And this union that we have with Jesus as our head means that just as we share our experience as one body, that experience I think is shared with Jesus.

So when we talk about sharing joy and sharing suffering, yes, we do that with each other, but I think the New Testament leads us as far to say that we share that with Jesus.

[35 : 21] So here's a question for you all to chew over at lunch. Well, you won't chew over it because I think I'm going to give you the answer, but anyway, here's a question. Does Jesus suffer after the cross?

So Jesus died in the cross suffering. Does Jesus suffer after the cross? Any reaction is probably no. I think the answer is yes. Paul speaks about this in verse 24, I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the church.

Now that does not mean that Christ's sufferings on the cross were inadequate. That's a finished work where Christ carried the full implications of our sin and through faith in that work we can all have eternal life.

That work on the cross is a finished work, but I think Paul is nudging us toward saying that Christ as head of the church suffers with the church.

[36 : 37] And that's why when Christ confronted Paul before he was converted on the road to Damascus when he was breathing out violence towards the church, Jesus said, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

I think the reason for this is because if you think about Christ's saving work, then the finishing line is the cross.

Yes, that was where it was completed. Everything was done. But when you think about God's overall plan of redemption, the finishing line is not the cross.

It's not the resurrection. It's not even the ascension. The finishing line is when Jesus will be able to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before God, as Paul beautifully describes in Colossians chapter one.

That's the goal, the new creation when the whole body is brought together. And that truth is brought before us very clearly in an interesting place in the Last Supper.

[38 : 01] Jesus took a cup when he'd given thanks. He said to them, he gave it to them saying, think of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Now that's all straightforward. It's instituting the Lord's Supper and we're familiar with that, I think, in many ways. Those of us who come to church regularly will be. Then in verse 2090 says something fascinating.

I tell you, I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my father's kingdom.

So right now, Jesus suffers with you. In the new creation, he will rejoice with you because for Jesus, the time to celebrate will only come when you are home.

That's because every member of his body is precious. Every part makes up a beautiful, united whole and whoever you are, you can be part of that body too.

[39 : 20] You put your trust in Jesus, pray to him, ask him to save you, trust him and follow him.

That's the call of the gospel.

Amen. Thank you for that, God. Dear God, our Father, we thank you for the way in which your word can use something so simple like our body to teach us truths that are so profound.

And we thank you, Lord, that we are part of one body. We thank you that we are different. We share strengths and we share weaknesses.

We pray that we would grow both in our sense of dependence on one another and in our desire to serve and support one another.

We pray that you would forgive us for all the ways in which we've wronged you and for all the ways in which we've wronged each other. And we pray that as a congregation and as a church in Scotland and as a church throughout the world that we really would live and think as a united body in Jesus.

[40 : 47] Amen.