YOU ARE THE BODY OF CHRIST

1 Corinthians 12:1–31

Key Verse: 12:27

“Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”

Have you ever felt like you don’t belong? As human beings we’re made to be close with other human beings. But we can feel left out when the people we’re with have common experiences we don’t share. In fact, human beings create social groups based on many standards—race, economics, class, intellect, ability, etc. If we don’t meet the standards of the group, no matter now nice a person we may be, we’re “out.” On the other hand, even if a group *does* accept us, we still can feel like we don’t belong, like we don’t measure up, like we’re useless. Human identity and belonging are essential, but they are complex issues. In today’s passage Paul teaches that as Christians, no matter who we are, we each have a shared identity and belonging. The standard is very simple, and it cuts through any other: it is faith in Christ. If we believe in Jesus, we’re part of his body, and we belong to other believers. But how can we have this identity and sense of belonging? Why is it so important that we do? May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

Beginning with chapter 11 Paul has been teaching the Corinthians about having orderly and quality church meetings. Basically, church meetings should be building unity, drawing people closer to Christ. Sadly, some people were being disruptive and selfish. The Corinthians especially had been emphasizing the distinction of who could or could not speak in tongues. When they got together, things quickly got chaotic, a little scary, and even harmful. So in chapters 12–14 Paul addresses the issue. To begin, in chapter 12 he lays a foundation of how to approach it. In verses 1–11 he says it’s the Spirit working among believers to give us all different gifts. In verses 12–31 he uses the analogy of the body to help us understand how and why God brings such different people together.

Read verse 1. Here Paul mentions “gifts of the Spirit.” What does it mean? When we repent of our sins and believe in Jesus, we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Ac2:38). The Holy Spirit changes us. He gives us a new spiritual life. He draws us into a real, living relationship with God. He gives us a strength and power we didn’t have before, and he guides our lives. But here, the Spirit, Paul says, also gives us “gifts.” Paul gets into what these gifts are later. But for now, he basically wants us to recognize that there’s a spiritual reality among believers. This spiritual reality is that through the Spirit God gives each believer certain gifts. He wants us not to be “uninformed” or ignorant of it.

Look at verse 2. Here Paul reminds them of their past. It was embarrassing. Why? Because they’d been “led astray to mute idols.” It’s interesting he didn’t just say “idols” or “dead idols” but “mute idols”—they couldn’t speak. Perhaps these people who’d been worshiping mute idols couldn’t speak much themselves! But now that they’d received the Spirit of God who’s not mute, who speaks, they were speaking a lot; some were even speaking in tongues! It was a language only gifted people could interpret. But God doesn’t want his people to be speaking random, non-understandable things; he wants us to communicate meaningfully. And there’s a specific thing he wants us to be communicating. What is it? Read verse 3. Paul is helping the Corinthians have the confidence to discern where people’s speech is coming from. It’s simple: If they’re cursing Jesus, they don’t have the Spirit; if they’re sincerely confessing Jesus as Lord, they do. The Holy Spirit’s main work is to glorify Jesus (Jn15:26; 16:14). So if we have the Spirit, then that becomes our goal, too, both personally and as a community. God doesn’t give people the Spirit just so that they can have ecstatic and miraculous spiritual experiences and powers. God gives us the Spirit so that we can know Jesus better as our Lord and help others know him, too.

Read verses 4–6. Here Paul contrasts what’s different and what’s the same. In the church there are different gifts, different kinds of service, different kinds of working. It’s interesting how Paul defines spiritual gifts as not just having emotional experiences, but as their leading to service and work. Though people may serve and work in different ways in a church, Paul says there are three things that are always the same: the same Spirit, the same Lord, the same God. It’s a reference to the Trinity: God the Spirit, God the Son, and God the Father. He’s the same God, in three different Persons. The Triune God is the Creator of all personality and identity. Knowing him is what enables us to find our true selves, our individual identity, and knowing him is what enables us to become truly close with others. Verse 6 says God is the one at work in everyone in his church. We may like to keep everything the same. But these verses tell us it’s okay to have different kinds of people and different ways of serving or working in our church, as long as we keep the focus on God and as long as our serving and work is inspired by God. God wants us to have a church that trusts in him and his work, not in ourselves and our work, and that allows him to work in his own way, not forces him to work in our way.

Read verse 7. This is an important principle. Here the word “manifestation” means “expression.” Through our “expressions” we show others our thoughts or feelings. In the same way, the Spirit gives people gifts mainly so that they can express God’s thoughts and feelings to the rest his people. Paul said the same thing back in 2:9–16. Here, the purpose, Paul says, is “for the common good.” Today we think of gifted people as naturally talented. Gifted people are impressive, and their outstanding qualities can draw attention to them and their greatness. But here, God’s Spirit gives us gifts not to enhance ourselves but for the common good of his people. The focus is not on us but on others. Another word Paul uses for “common good” is to “build up” or “edify” (14:5,12,17, 19,22–26). It means to help others grow in Christ and be strengthened spiritually. The Bible repeatedly tells us the best way to use our gifts is not to indulge ourselves but to serve others (Eph4:12; 1Pe4:10,11).

In verses 8–10 Paul lists various gifts the Spirit gives: a message of wisdom or knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in tongues and interpreting them. These are not all the possible spiritual gifts, but a general list. Paul’s point here is that all these varying gifts come from one and the same Spirit. Why is he emphasizing that? Firstly, it’s to give credit for the gifts to God, not to the people who have them. Also, it’s to help us trust all the God-given gifts among his people. When God gifts a person through his Spirit, we should trust that person and let him or her do the work God has for them. Finally, it’s to help the Corinthians realize that speaking in tongues are just one of many of the God-given gifts among his people, and that its purpose should be “for the common good.” Read verse 11. Here Paul concludes by emphasizing that the Spirit is the source of all gifts, and that God is sovereign in how he “distributes” these gifts. We need to accept God’s sovereignty and depend on the Spirit.

In the next part, to help the Corinthians find themselves and their place in the church, Paul uses the analogy of a body. Read verse 12. By saying “so it is with Christ,” Paul is talking about all those who believe in him. As a church we’re all one, but we also have many parts, and that’s a good thing. Read verses 13,14. Here Paul mentions both the spiritual unity and diversity in the church. How is it that anyone comes to belong to a church? Paul says we were “baptized by one Spirit.” Scholars talk about both the invisible church and the visible church. We all become members of the invisible church of Christ when we’re born again by the Holy Spirit. But by that same Spirit we’re also united to a visible church. Today people view church attendance in many ways. For most people, it’s an option, maybe at important holidays like Christmas or Easter. For others, they may start going to church mainly to educate their children. Some go when it’s convenient. Many pick a church based on where they think they’re going to feel comfortable. They try to find a church with their own kind of people. Whites go to white churches, blacks go to black churches, Hispanics go to Hispanic churches, Asians go to Asian churches, educated people go to educated churches, etc. But here, Paul mentions Jews, Gentiles, slaves and free people all being part of the same church, and that being a good thing. Why would these widely different people get together and feel like they belong together? It’s simple: because they believe in Jesus, love him and want to serve him. Ultimately, as Christians it’s these people we can relate to more deeply, even though they may be very different from us humanly. Our Lord Jesus once said that his mother, brothers and sisters are “whoever does God’s will” (Mk3:35). It’s a spiritual connection, a spiritual unity, a spiritual belonging. It’s good to be aware of our differences, but it’s also good to be aware of what really makes us belong to each other—our personal union with Christ through the Holy Spirit.

So why does Paul mention the differences? Read verses 15,16. He seems to be addressing a specific problem. What is it? It’s a sense of inferiority. Just as a foot may seem lesser than a hand, or an ear lesser than an eye, so some people are chronically plagued by inferiority, especially when they’re with others. They envy those who seem more gifted, then feel useless. But to this Paul says “No!” Read verses 17–20. Just as with parts of the human body, so the church needs all kinds of people with their specific giftings. Paul even may be suggesting that the more unique and varied the gifts of its individuals, the stronger and richer a specific church body will be. In verse 20 he repeats for the third time that the church is one body with many parts. It calls us to overcome our inferiority and find out what part God wants me to play in my church. Read verse 18 again. We can have a meaningful commitment to a visible church when we realize that God has placed me in it for his own good purpose.

Then Paul goes on to another problem with differences. Read verse 21. This refers to having a sense of superiority. It’s the problem of people who think they’re specially gifted. They tend to look down on those who seem less gifted. They even develop the mentality “I don’t need you.” What is this saying to us? It’s saying that as Christians, we’re not self-sufficient, no matter how gifted or talented or strong we think we are; we really need each other. Really? Why do we need each other so much? It’s because others have the gifts that I don’t have. It’s also because it’s only together that we can really serve as the full body of Christ. We need each other’s prayers and encouragement. We need each other’s spiritual discernment and feedback. Paul goes on to explain. Read verses 22–24a. Here Paul especially emphasizes the “weaker,” “less honorable,” and “unpresentable” parts of the body. It’s painful to see ourselves like this, but sometimes we are! We may even feel totally unnecessary and useless in our church. But just as in the human body, these parts are actually “indispensable.” It means without them, the body can’t really function. Even the appendix, which seems like a useless body part, if it gets infected, can cause the whole body to die. Paul wants us all to see ourselves as indispensable members in our church. It may sound conceited, but in Christ, it’s actually true humility. He also wants us to treat people who seem “lesser” with special honor, and those who seem “greater” as those who need no special treatment. It’s the opposite of what we tend to do. In the book of James, a church gets rebuked for giving special attention to the rich while telling the poor to sit in a humble place (Jas2:1–4). To overcome our tendency to ignore the weak and poor, who may seem like they’ll bring no benefit, we have to be very intentional as a church community.

Paul puts it this way. Read verses 24b,25. God tends to give greater honor to the parts of the body of Christ that lacked it. He does this now, on earth, partially, and he will definitely do it fully in heaven. God’s purpose is to eliminate divisions in his church and create an atmosphere of “equal concern.” What does it mean? Read verse 26. This describes the beauty of a genuine, healthy, Christ-like Christian community. We live in an age of selfishness and indifference, and people naturally tend to be competitive. They rejoice when others fail, and sorrow when others succeed. But with Christ in our hearts, we can truly suffer with those who suffer and truly rejoice with those who rejoice.

Read verse 27. This is Paul’s main point. Each of us needs to find our identity and sense of belonging in our church. We can’t really get it through our education or job or talents, or through what people of the world may think of us, but through community with God’s people. If we don’t find our place in God’s church, we wander. Read verse 28. Here Paul mentions some other gifts he didn’t mention earlier: teaching, helping and guiding. He also ranks the gifts in a kind of order, to help the Corinthians stop obsessing about speaking in tongues. The point of his rhetorical questions in verses 29,30 is to again help us find our place in God’s work. He concludes by saying, “Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.” The greater gifts are the ones that best build up his church. Instead of trying to get everyone to speak in tongues, we all should be desiring the greater gifts.

Read verse 27 again. May God help us find our true identity and sense of belonging in Christ and in his body. May God make us a healthy body of Christ that embraces our differences and welcomes everyone.