

## *Members One of Another*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on June 5, 2022.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness (Rom. 12:3–8).<sup>1</sup>

Modern Evangelicals have seemingly accomplished a miracle (Or, maybe it's a magic trick?), something foreign to Scripture yet readily embraced: the churchless Christian. Emphasizing our desires over God's design and our pleasure over pleasing him, we have relegated the cherished assembly of the Beloved into a consumer's option. This not to say that God is forgotten. But with the reign of easy-believism, the individual is all-important, and the authority of the self stands sovereign. In his commentary on Romans, James Boice (writing in 1995) observes, "It strikes me...that today the problem is our individualism, which I would define as hyperpersonalized religion. It is the religion of 'Jesus and me only.'"<sup>2</sup> Boice goes onto label this phenomenon a form of narcissism, warning, "you cannot have 'one body in Christ' if everyone is creating a private little a la carte religion for himself."<sup>3</sup>

But a churchless Christianity does have its benefits. For one, it opens up another day for weekend play, eliminating the inconvenient drudgery of Sunday worship. And since Christianity has become defined as nothing more than a moral choice, why bore yourself? I mean, even so-called contemporary worship feels out-of-date by decades (like a bad '90s cover band) and a paltry substitute for real entertainment.

And then, there are the people...church people, and the commitments that come with them. Who wants to hassle with the needs of others when we're focused on our felt needs? Who wants to help with real needs when there's reality TV to watch? And worse, the more you *really* get to know those church people, you feel compelled to serve them, for Christ's sake, and even let them serve you. Whoa! That's way too close for comfort. Why not stay away and listen to a podcast?

But then something happens: You read your Bible and realize that Paul wrote to the local church in Rome, another in Corinth, others in Galatia and Ephesus, as well as Philippi, Colossus, Thessalonica, and to Timothy as he served in the local church. Work your way through the rest of the New Testament and what you will find is what we enjoy as a collected, organized, and

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The New Humanity: Romans 12-16* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), 4:1578.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1579.

bound canon of New Testament Scripture started out as individual letters sent to and read in real, local churches. It is not an exaggeration to say that the sub-context of New Testament Scripture is literally the local church. A churchless Christian is foreign to Scripture as well as the majority of church history.

For this reason, much of what we are taught in Scripture is given to us in union with one another. Yet, even within the church it is easy to hear Paul's charge to "present your bodies as a living sacrifice," and "not be conformed to this world," and to "be transformed by the renewal of your mind," and think that the Christian life consists of individual spiritual effort, all alone. It doesn't. The Christian life is never contemplated nor advocated to be lived in individual isolation but in community, in the fellowship of the church. Our sacrificial worship and transformation then take place within the local church, and as such it involves considering one another in humility and service.

### **A People of Humility**

What we think about ourselves impacts how we live with one another. If we consider ourselves superior to others, we will struggle to serve them. Whether it be your age or experience, your wealth or status, your education or accomplishments, whatever the case, how you see yourself in relation to others will impede serving others. As we are not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought, instead we serve one another in love.

This calls for clear-headed thinking, sober self-judgment, not blinded by an inflated view of self but in humility considering others as more important than yourself (Phil. 2:3). Such sobriety can be startling among people obsessed with their rights and needs, but it can also wear down even the most selfish among us or send some running for the exit door. If you find yourself offended, as if you are not getting what you deserve,

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:5-8).

It's hard to fight for your perceived rights with your brother when you are sacrificially serving him like Christ.

In fact, Paul's appeal to us is rooted in the reality of the gospel and its practical application within Christ's church, "according to the measure of faith that God has assigned," or "as God has distributed to each of you a measure of faith." (NET). By faith, God has brought us into his church, by faith God gifts us to serve, and it is by faith we humbly seek to serve one another. This includes a right assessment of the specific needs within the church and a right assessment of how God has gifted us to serve those needs by his grace. This means that if all you can do is think about how the church is not serving you, or how it is violating your rights, you're *not* humbly and obediently serving according to the measure of faith God has given you. Thinking of yourself over others isn't according to faith at all.

Now, you may be wondering whom God has called you to serve and how you may serve them, not as the church's only hope (we already have a Savior, and you are not him!) but as a member of the body, a vital part of the whole. Well, we'll get to that, but to start you need to get your thinking straight, off you, onto others. This we do humbly. This we do soberly. This we do joyfully. For, this we do together, in unity as a community of faith.

### **A Community of Unity**

To explain the necessary unity within the church, Paul employs a metaphor: the human body, designed and created by God. Picturing the body and its various parts, Paul explains, "For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another." Though we are many, we are one. Though we differ in many ways, notably in our God-given gifts, we are one. Though we serve within the church in a variety of ways, we are one.

Confusion then comes not in our diversity, but when our unity is threatened by comparison, when I consider my gift in comparison to yours. Using the same metaphor, Paul explains this dilemma to the Corinthians, "If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. 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? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body" (1 Cor. 12:15–20). So integral is this to the health of the church, Paul says, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (1 Cor. 12:26). We really are interconnected as the body of Christ.

Now imagine the absurdity of a churchless Christian in this discussion? What part can a body part play severed from the body? It serves no one and nothing but lies lifeless, a part without purpose. Or, how can one suffer with those who suffer or rejoice with those who rejoice, if you are not living with them in the local church? You cannot. All you can do is continue in your selfish existence, playing at the Christian life yet separated from it.

In writing to the Ephesians, and from them on to various local churches, and from them on to us, Paul clarifies, "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4-6). Paul's repetition is intentional, and it preaches unity. There is one body, the church universal (or catholic) which manifests itself in local congregations. And by God's design there should be "no division in the body, but the members may have mutual concern for one another" (1 Cor. 12:25 NET).

But Paul adds to this the unity we have in various other ways. We are all brought to spiritual life by one Spirit. We all look in hope to the fulfillment of our salvation. We are a people in Christ alone. And we believe in one gospel, eternally saved by one faith. We are identified with Christ through our one and only baptism. And all of this points us to the unity of our one God, three in

persons, “the same in substance, equal in power and glory” (WSC Q. 6). As there is unity within the Trinity, we are to be unified in the church as a community of unity.

### **A Body of Diversity**

Unity, however, does not negate diversity. We are one body with many parts, members one of another, with “gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.” This does not mean that some of us have gifts that are greater than others but gifts that differ. Every gift received is literally a grace gift (*charismata*). As grace is the unmerited favor of God, so are his gifts.

Now, consider the goodness of God in these gifts: He who calls you to serve one another in the church gives you the God-glorifying gifts to do just that! Who doesn’t find satisfaction and get joy from using your gifts? Some fret over what their gift is, taking tests and surveys, seeking some sort of revelation. This is a fool’s errand. The best way to learn your gift is to find a need in the church and meet it. And if you have not yet discovered that need where you may serve, dedicate yourself to praying for it. Don’t wait for a program, just be proactive. For, it is through serving one another that we not only discover our gifts but delight in them.

Not as a list to be followed but for example, Paul provides seven examples: prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading, and showing mercy. The prophet was to communicate revelations of the truth from God, not of his own accord but in accordance with the Christian faith. The one gifted to serve the church does just that, serving where and as needed. The teacher may research, write, and rehearse, but for the sake of the church he must teach. The one who exhorts is busy encouraging others. Meanwhile, the giver must not only give but give generously, simply, and sincerely. The leader must lead with diligence, for “Where there is no guidance, a people falls” (Prov. 11:14). And the one who shows mercy, perhaps by visiting the sick, caring for the disabled, or helping the poor, should do so gladly, for what we do for the least we do for the Lord. Whether you see yourself in this list or not is not the point. Serving the body of Christ is. Seek to serve, and you will find your gift.

You will note, however, how many of the gifts in Paul’s list your pastor and elders do not possess. Shocking, isn’t it? It shouldn’t be. Our gifting is limited, as is yours. Listen, if you are frustrated that I am not, or the other elders are not, meeting your needs with our assumed arsenal of gifts, it’s probably because you need to stop acting like a consumer and start living like a servant. There are no sideline seats for spectators in the church. Get in the game. God has gifted you to serve in the local church.

For, we are all servants of Christ, gifted to serve his body, glorifying him as we serve one another. Paul encouraged Timothy, “fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you” (2 Tim. 1:6). God has gifted you uniquely, not for the purpose of your isolation or independence or individualism but for his church. By God’s design, we need one another, for we are members one of another.