

Building Up the Body

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a four-part series

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1 Corinthians 3:1–3, 10–13 (CEB)

Brothers and sisters, I couldn't talk to you like spiritual people but like unspiritual people, like babies in Christ. ² I gave you milk to drink instead of solid food, because you weren't up to it yet. ³ Now you are still not up to it because you are still unspiritual. When jealousy and fighting exist between you, aren't you unspiritual and living by human standards? . . .

¹⁰ I laid a foundation like a wise master builder according to God's grace that was given to me, but someone else is building on top of it. Each person needs to pay attention to the way they build on it. ¹¹ No one can lay any other foundation besides the one that is already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² So, whether someone builds on top of the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, grass, or hay, ¹³ each one's work will be clearly shown. The day will make it clear, because it will be revealed with fire—the fire will test the quality of each one's work.

1 Corinthians 12:12–26 (CEB)

¹² Christ is just like the human body—a body is a unit and has many parts; and all the parts of the body are one body, even though there are many. ¹³ We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jew or Greek, or slave or free, and we all were given one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴ Certainly the body isn't one part but many. ¹⁵ If the foot says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not a hand," does that mean it's not part of the body? ¹⁶ If the ear says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not an eye," does that mean it's not part of the body? ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, what would happen to the hearing? And if the whole body were an ear, what would happen to the sense of smell? ¹⁸ But as it is, God has placed each one of the parts in the body just like he wanted. ¹⁹ If all were one and the same body part, what would happen to the body? ²⁰ But as it is, there are many parts but one body. ²¹ So the eye can't say to the hand, "I don't need you," or in turn, the head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you." ²² Instead, the parts of the body that people think are the weakest are the most necessary. ²³ The parts of the body that we think are less honorable are the ones we honor the most. The private parts of our body that aren't presentable are the ones that are given the most dignity. ²⁴ The parts of our body that are presentable don't need this. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the part with less honor ²⁵ so that there won't be division in the body and so the parts might have mutual concern for each other. ²⁶ If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part gets the glory, all the parts celebrate with it.

John 17:20–26 (CEB)

²⁰ "I'm not praying only for them but also for those who believe in me because of their word. ²¹ I pray they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. I pray that they also will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me. ²² I've given them the glory that you gave me so that they can be one just as we are one. ²³ I'm in them and you are in me so that they will be made perfectly one. Then the world will know that you sent me and that you have loved them just as you loved me.

²⁴ "Father, I want those you gave me to be with me where I am. Then they can see my glory, which you gave me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

²⁵ "Righteous Father, even the world didn't know you, but I've known you, and these believers know that you sent me. ²⁶ I've made your name known to them and will continue to make it known so that your love for me will be in them, and I myself will be in them."

All for one and one for all! As true for Christians as it was for the musketeers.

Start reading through Paul's letters in the New Testament and one quickly finds out that he has a lot to say on a wide range of topics. Even when we rightly remember that we are listening in on only one end of these conversations, there is still a lot to understand. So, let me help.

A good way to understand Paul's advice and instruction is to read it through a lens that has four parts:

1. Do what builds up the body of Christ.
2. Do what is a good witness to Jesus.

3. Avoid what tears down the body of Christ.
4. Avoid what is a bad witness to Jesus.

I came across this simple interpretation aid years ago (though I can't remember where!). It has stood the test of time. Why does Paul want all public speaking in tongues to be interpreted (see 1 Corinthians 14)? Here's why. How can the practice build up the body (the church) if no one besides the tongues speaker knows what is being said? Similarly, why does Paul want the believers to be orderly and controlled when they gather to worship (also 1 Corinthians 14)? Because the chaos will make the believers look crazy to outsiders. How could that be a good witness to our Lord?

So, the obvious and appropriate questions are: (1) how can we do all we could to build up the body of Christ, in our case, the local church called St. Andrew?, and (2) how can we better witness to Christ? This is what we'll be considering for the next couple of weeks.

Making ourselves ready

If we are going to do all we can to build up the body of Christ and be a good witness to Jesus, then we need to make ourselves ready. At a minimum, that means we have to grow in our Christian maturity. That is Paul's point in today's passage from 1 Corinthians 3. These new believers in Corinth are infants in the faith, and in Paul's metaphor, able to only drink milk – the barest minimum of the Gospel. Should we then be surprised that the Corinthians are having all sorts of problems living out the Good News? 1 Corinthians is a very long letter that addresses a long list of problems.

Paul wants the Corinthians to grow up in their faith and in their understanding, so that they can eat the solid food of the Gospel. Without that, they will be like the believers in Ephesus, “blown around by every wind that comes from teaching with deceitful scheming and the tricks people play to mislead others” (Ephesians 4:14).

In Corinth this immaturity is being demonstrated by, among other problems, divisions among the believers. Some follow Paul and others follow another leader called Apollos. Paul rightly sees that such divisions will tear apart these fragile communities. So he pushes them toward unity. They are to use their many and diverse gifts to build up the body of Christ, but without surrendering their oneness in Christ.

One body, many members

Steve Martin and Lily Tomlin's 1984 movie, “All of Me,” is a funny movie. Lily Tomlin plays Edwina Cutwater, a very rich woman who doesn't want to die. She finds another woman willing to accept her soul, but a mistake during the “operation” sends Edwina's soul directly into the body of Roger Cobb, a passing lawyer. To make matters worse, she takes over only half of Roger's body. Thus, Edwina controls one arm and one leg while Roger controls the other arm and leg. Needless to say, with Edwina *and* Roger in charge, the poor fellow's arms and legs are not all pulling in the same direction. Steve Martin's gift for physical comedy is on full display as he portrays a man whose limbs have minds of their own.

I wonder if the apostle Paul would find the movie all that funny, or if it would hit a little too close to home. Today's second passage from 1 Corinthians reveals that the believers in Corinth were too much like Edwina/Roger, with the various parts/limbs/members¹ pulling in different directions. Paul doesn't see unity in Corinth, much less unity of purpose. Instead, he sees a community divided.

Most of us quickly grasp several of Paul's points in this passage.

1. First, we humans are a diverse bunch. Though there is much in our humanness that we share, we all know quite well that there is a wide range of personalities, experiences, and values that threaten to divide even the smallest groups.

¹“Member” is used in some translations. Our modern use of the word “member” as in “one who belongs to,” is based on this older meaning of a body limb or organ.

2. Second, we know that God has given us a variety of gifts. Whether we call them gifts or talents², we know that some are good at one thing, others at another. I'm pretty good talking in front of groups. My wife is the one that you'd want caring for you during a difficult time.
3. Third, I think we understand that these various gifts make our community stronger. To use Paul's body metaphor, the eye needs the hand that needs the foot. The body needs them all. Our diversity is a benefit – so long as it is lived out in love and in unity of purpose.

We know all these things, but sadly churches too often allow their inherent diversity to pull them down into discord, instead of striving for harmonious unity that truly honors and glorifies God.

“That they may all be one”

In emphasizing unity, Paul is merely following Jesus' lead. On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus met with his disciples for one last meal. He began it by washing their feet and concluded it with his lengthy prayer to the Father (John 17). Of course, Jesus praying is not quite like you and me praying. Jesus is the Divine Revealer in what he does, what he says, and who he is. To put it another way, Jesus is the complete and definitive revelation of God. Thus, Jesus is not only praying to the Father, he is also addressing us with a prophetic word that we need to hear.

There are several themes in Jesus' prayer: the glorification of the Father through Jesus' death and exaltation, Jesus' obedience of the Father, the revelation of God in Jesus, setting the disciples apart from the world, the disciples' protection, and their mission.³ First and foremost, though, Jesus' prayer is for unity among the believers. Unity in Christ. Unity in truth. Unity in purpose.

We live in the United States. We give to the United Way. Our coins bear the Latin phrase, *E Pluribus Unum*, “out of many, one.” As Americans, however, we are not united in our values or ethnicity. We are not united in our religion or beliefs. We are united in our laws. But what does Jesus mean when he prays that the disciples, then and now, will be one?

Here is how Jesus describes this unity in his prayer. The Father is in Jesus and Jesus is in the Father. Jesus prays that we will also be in Jesus and the Father (v. 21). We are to be one, as Jesus and the Father are one (v. 22). Jesus is in us and we are in Jesus so that we, the disciples then and now, may be completely one (v. 23).

Whew! That is enough to set any head spinning, so let's unpack it a bit. Jesus and the Father are one but they are still distinguishable. The Son prays to the Father; Jesus isn't praying to himself. The Son is obedient to the Father, who sends the Son into the world. Yet when people saw the Son, they saw the Father (John 12:45). What Jesus does, the Father does (14:10). One . . . but distinguishable.

Perhaps the best way to understand Jesus' meaning is to look ahead to Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit, aka the “Spirit of Christ” and the “Spirit of God,” arrives to dwell not only in the fellowship of believers but in each believer. There is even a Pentecost moment in John's gospel when, after Jesus' resurrection, he breathes on the disciples, saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:22). The Spirit, who is also one with Father and the Son yet distinguishable from both and from us, forms us into one body. We often affirm this in the benediction taken from one of Paul's letters: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (2 Cor. 13:13).

“That the world may believe”

Why are we to be united? Or to put it more carefully, why has God set us apart as a single body, grounded in God's truth? Why does Paul believe that unity is absolutely necessary if we are going to build for God's kingdom?

² A biblically derived word that comes from Jesus' so-called parable of the talents (see Matthew 25:14-30).

³ From D.A. Carson's commentary on John in the *Pillar New Testament Commentary* series, Eerdmans, 1991.

First, Jesus has given us the glory that was given him by the Father (v. 22). “Glory” is often a misunderstood word. It refers to the manifestation of God’s being or character through an act that reveals it. Glory is about showing that God is God. Jesus revealed the love and faithfulness of God in his suffering and death. We too are to reveal God’s love and faithfulness in what we do. The world is to see who God is through us.

Second, we are one so that the world can know that the Father sent Jesus and loves the world just as the Father loves Jesus. There could hardly be a more striking evangelistic appeal. We are not formed into God’s people for our own sakes, but for the sake of the world. God’s purpose is that every person might come to know God and know God’s love. Our mission, as believers, is to carry forward that purpose.

There can be no sitting on our hands, no comfort with the status quo. Are there people who do not know that God loves them and that Jesus is their Lord? Are there believers who have only begun to taste the riches of God’s faithfulness?

Whether it is reaching out to children or to youth, to white or to black, to the rich or to the poor . . . we can never forget why God has blessed us by calling us to him and setting us apart for his work.

This is why we at St. Andrew strive to be evermore outwardly focused. There are always more children to introduce to Jesus. More youth to help understand what it really means to be a believer. More adults to teach and to help grow in their own discipleship. More people to care for. More who need to be invited to the Lord. More poor to feed and to clothe. Always more. Always more.

None of this is a burden or an obligation. Rather, revealing the love and faithfulness of God is a privilege, a profound and energizing privilege. This is not only who we are to be, it is who we are. God has formed us into a fellowship, empowered by his Spirit, to do and to be more than we would ever imagine. By the grace of God we are united. Who says so? Jesus -- and Paul!

So then, let’s work for the good of all whenever we have an opportunity, and especially for those in the household of faith. (Galatians 6:10)

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Any congregation is a diverse set of people, often with vastly different backgrounds, talents, and opinions (see 1 Cor. 12:12-31). In what ways are we unified as believers? Beliefs? If so, what beliefs? Actions? If so, what actions? If you could ask Paul or Jesus to be a bit more specific about this unity, what do you think he would say?
2. God has given us all talents and abilities. Some we have discovered over our lifetime, some may be waiting to be discovered. Some we’ve cultivated, others we’ve ignored. Paul speaks of gifts given to us by the Spirit, such as he lists in 1 Corinthians 12 and elsewhere. Do you think that these gifts differ from other talents we discover in ourselves? If so, how do such “spiritual gifts” differ from what we think of as talents? If not, what does Paul want us to understand about the gifts? You probably ought to look over some of Paul’s others passages on the gifts, such as Romans 12:3-8 and Ephesians 4:11-13. For what purpose has God given us any gifts at all?
3. Paul begins Corinthians 12 with his affirmation that it is the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit alone, who enables anyone to affirm that “Jesus is Lord.” Paul goes on to say that it is by the Spirit that we are all baptized into one body and that it is the Spirit who gives us the many gifts for the common good. The Spirit is God-present with us. As we move forward on accomplishing what we believe to be God’s vision for St. Andrew, what do you think are the Spirit’s, i.e., God’s, hopes for us? What are God’s expectations of us? How we help to ensure that our diversity does not pull us away from our unity of purpose and of commitment? What, specifically, are we doing to build up the body of Christ?

Richard Hays on the Spirit and the Church

In his excellent commentary on 1 Corinthians in the *Interpretation* series, Professor Richard Hays of Duke Seminary, an ordained UMC elder, offers the following reflections on today's passage. A copy of his commentary is in the St. Andrew library.

"Spiritual manifestations as gifts. Paul repeatedly emphasizes that the workings of the Holy Spirit in the church are *gifts* distributed by God. There is always a danger that we will fall into the error of regarding these gifts as if they were simple natural capacities or talents, for which we might claim credit or in which we might take pride. Against this tendency, Paul's whole discussion in 1 Corinthians 12 reminds us of the questions posed in 4:7: "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" Every gift of the Spirit is given "for the common good" (12:7) and must be exercised in the church for the sake of ministry to the whole community. As soon as gifts start to be treated as possessions for the private thrills or personal aggrandizement of individuals, they become corrupted and may begin to cause dissension. I have participated in well-meaning church discussion groups that ask each person to answer the question "What are your spiritual gifts?" While such conversations can be helpful in some ways, they run the risk of turning Paul's lists of gifts (vv. 8–10, 28) into a sort of spiritualized Myers-Briggs inventory of personality types. Paul would not want us to spend our time gazing into the mirror and asking what profile of gifts each of us has; he would prefer that we simply be about the business of using our gifts in service to the community.

*The church is a **charismatic** community.* Paul pictures the church as a community in which the Holy Spirit operates in powerful and palpable ways through gifts of healing, miracles, and revelatory speech, including tongues and prophecy. Churches in the Pentecostal tradition and communities that have experienced charismatic renewal have recovered such gifts as an integral part of Christian worship and ministry; these manifestations of the Spirit have particularly characterized the rapidly expanding churches of the Third World. In many churches, however—perhaps most churches in the historic Protestant traditions—such phenomena are unknown and may be perceived as threatening. For such churches, 1 Corinthians 12 will indeed look like somebody else's mail. While Paul is aware that the workings of the Holy Spirit are not limited to the more spectacular manifestations that we now characterize as "charismatic," we should not domesticate his conception of the Spirit's power by excluding such gifts from our field of vision—as though he had been talking only about serving on the finance committee or planning the Sunday school curriculum. Teachers working through this text with a class unfamiliar with the manifestations of the Spirit that Paul describes in verses 8–10 might plan to take the group to visit a contemporary community where tongues and prophecy are manifested in the worship service. Such communities should not be hard to find, for in our time the Spirit has chosen to distribute these gifts in churches all around the world. Any community committed to taking Paul's vision for the church as a model for its life will have to ask seriously whether 1 Corinthians 12 does not summon us to open ourselves more radically to the possibility of such manifestations of the Spirit in our midst.

*The church is a **charismatic community**.* Paul is also insistent that the gifts of the Spirit must be exercised within the body of Christ for the benefit of the community as a whole. As we have seen, this leads him to highlight the twin themes of *diversity* and *interdependence*: it is good that different individuals have different gifts, and all these different gifts must be orchestrated together for the common good of the community. An important part of the preacher's task will be to discern how these motifs should be balanced to address the needs of the particular local congregation. Some churches, more susceptible to the error of "Lone Ranger" Christianity, may need to hear the appeal for interdependence emphasized, while others, more inclined to press for conformity of Christian experience, may need to hear Paul's affirmation of diverse gifts within the body of Christ. In any case, the image of the body of Christ, as Paul has developed it, provides a vision for authentic community in which there is both great individual freedom (vv. 14–20) and powerful interpersonal sharing and support (vv. 21–26). The goal of our ministry should be nothing less than the formation of such communities."

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday 1 Cor. 12:27-13:13 None of the gifts we are given by God for the work of the church are superior to the others. The greatest gifts, the ones for which we should strive, are faith, hope, and love.	Tuesday Philippians 1:3-11 Living in the body of Christ
Wednesday Philippians 2:1-18 Because we are united with Christ we are to imitate Christ's humility	Thursday 1 Cor. 14:26-40 Using our gifts for the good of the community not for ourselves.
Friday 1 Cor. 14:1-25 Using gifts wisely. A case in point.	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class – now studying 2 Kings

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying 1 Timothy

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series:

Why I am not a Calvinist, a neo-Calvinist, or a pseudo-Calvinist, though your son or daughter might be.

Our next series – starting the week after Easter:

The History, Scope, and Goals of the Jihadist Ideology

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org

Sermon Notes
