**NEW MEMBER SUNDAY**

**UNITY IN THE BODY OF CHRIST**

**1 Corinthians 12:12-26**

**INTRODUCTION**

My kids like to play a game when they’re bored. It doesn’t have a name, but it has a song, and it involves identifying two things they like to eat and then combining them to see if they would still eat it.

And so, they might sing, “Do you like spinach? Yes I do, Yes I do. Do you like ice cream? Yes I do, Yes I do. Do you like spinach ice cream? Eww, yucky!” The possibilities are endless. Popcorn? Yes. Juice? Yes. Popcorn juice? Eww, yucky. Once in awhile, they come up with a strange combination that they actually like. Chocolate? Yes. Pizza? Yes. Chocolate Pizza? Mmm, yummy!

The game is built on the premise that things that are good by themselves aren’t always good together. You can actually spoil a good thing by combining it with something else. My wife may like me, and she may like things to be fixed around the house, but if she combines me with fixing things around the house, bad things are going to happen.

What about the church? What if you put different people from different backgrounds with different gifts and personalities and put them all together? Today we’re baptizing people and welcoming them and others into church membership. Each of these people is unique, with their own personalities, and gifts, and weaknesses, so if we combine them all together with our existing church, what do we get?

In our text today, the Apostle Paul is going to address this very question as he writes to a church that was characterized by differences and divisions. Some of the members of the Corinthian church thought that their superior knowledge or their superior giftings made them superior Christians. They exalted those who were eloquent in speech, or who spoke in tongues, or who otherwise impressed them by the force of their personality, and the result was that they looked down on those who were less gifted and less impressive.

Such a church won’t survive for long, because as Jesus himself said, “A kingdom divided against itself will fall.” Churches die for many reasons, but among the leading causes of death is division. Division is “ecclesiological cancer”, because the threat comes from within the body rather than without. Churches don’t tend to explode as often as they implode.

The remedy to division isn’t to stop talking about doctrine, or sin, or the need to repent. That would kill the church in a different way. The remedy to division is much simpler. Our text today suggests three ways that churches can move from division to unity:

1. Changing the way that we see the church
2. Changing the way that we see ourselves
3. Changing the way that we see others

(1) **CHANGING THE WAY THAT WE SEE THE CHURCH**

Paul uses one of his favourite metaphors for the church in verse 12:

**12**For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

Notice how he emphasizes both the unity and the diversity of the body by saying the same thing twice by reversing the order. He goes from unity to diversity when he says “The body is one and has many members”, and then he goes from diversity to unity when he says “all the members of the body, though many, are one body”. He does this so that neither unity nor diversity will be seen as more important than the other. Both are equally important to the health of the body.

That’s true of the church as well. But notice that he doesn’t say “so it is with the church”. He says, “so it is with Christ”. The church is so closely associated with Christ that he actually calls the church “Christ” in verse 12. The church is the body of Christ, not in the sense that we are identical to him, but in the sense that we are united to him. Like the “one flesh” union between a husband and his wife, Christ also enters into a spiritual union with his bride, which is the church. That’s why Jesus can say in Matthew 25 that whatever you did for the least of his brothers, you did it for him. How you treat the church reflects how you treat Christ himself.

Paul talks about the “members of the body” in verse 12. He’s not using the word “member” in the sense of being a member of a club or an organization. He’s talking about a member being a constituent part of a whole. We could translate the “members of the body” as the “parts of the body” or the “organs and limbs of the body”. The body has many organs and limbs, and so does the church.

This is important for us to keep in mind when we talk about church membership. Church membership isn’t about belonging to an exclusive club and getting exclusive member perks. Nor is it just about attending meetings, or being on a special list, or helping to make decisions. Church membership is about being an organic part of a living, breathing entity. It’s about being the organs and limbs of the church. It’s about recognizing that the health of the parts determines the health of the whole.

That’s why we don’t just measure the health of our members by what ministries they’re a part of, or how much they’re serving, though that’s certainly part of the equation. We measure the health of our members by whether they’re trusting in the Lord, whether they’re confessing their sins, whether they’re being nourished regularly by the Word, and whether they’re developing spiritual friendships.

People can serve in all the ministries they want, but if they’re not doing well spiritually, that’s not a healthy church. If my hands are broken, I can still put them to work, but that doesn’t mean I have a healthy body. Working is certainly not going to make me healthy. To be healthy, my hands need to be cared for, mended, and healed for my body to become healthy again.

In the same way, spiritual health comes from the medicine of God’s Word, the exercise of prayer, and the fresh air of Christian fellowship. That’s what makes healthy members, and that’s what makes healthy churches.

Paul goes on in verse 13:

**13**For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

Paul’s identifying the basis of our unity. It’s the Holy Spirit. We were baptized into one body by one Spirit. We weren’t brought together by many different spirits into many different bodies, but by one Spirit, who baptized us into one body.

In the Corinthian church, that meant that people who didn’t associate with one another like Jews and Greeks, and slaves and freemen, were brought together into one body, because their entrance into that body didn’t depend on who they were. It depended on the work of the Holy Spirit.

The same is true today. None of us belong to this body of believers because we’re good enough, wealthy enough, or educated enough. We belong to this body of believers because the Holy Spirit moved in our hearts. That’s why we can be one. We all come equally needy, equally weak, equally unable to earn our way into the body of Christ, so when the Spirit brings us to Christ, we don’t come proud and arrogant. We come humble and broken. The ground is level at the foot of the cross for all who are drawn by the Spirit.

Paul uses the language of the Spirit “baptizing” us into the one body of Christ and even “drinking of one Spirit” because there was always meant to be a close association between conversion and baptism. Baptism was never meant to be for the strong and mature. It was meant for spiritual infants who were just beginning to learn what it meant to live as Christians.

This is why we associate baptism with church membership. Once you’ve put your faith in Christ and are baptized, you don’t have to meet a higher standard of spiritual maturity to become a member, because you already belong to Christ. And if you belong to Christ, you belong to his body.

This is what makes church unity possible. If we see the church as the body of Christ brought together not by our works but the Spirit’s work, we won’t exalt ourselves or put others down. We won’t be cruel or harsh with our brothers and sisters in Christ. That would be akin to being cruel or harsh with our own bodies. Instead, we will humbly serve others with a desire to build others up, because the stronger the body becomes, the stronger its parts become as well.

(2) **CHANGING THE WAY THAT WE SEE OURSELVES**

But sometimes the barrier to unity and fellowship doesn’t come from how we see the church, but how we see ourselves. We don’t believe that we’re good enough, or spiritual enough, or gifted enough to belong to the church. That requires changing the way that we see ourselves, which leads to our second point.

Paul addresses these people in verses 14-16 by introducing us to Mr. Foot and Mrs. Ear:

**14**For the body does not consist of one member but of many. **15**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. **16**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.

Both Mr. Foot and Mrs. Ear have one thing in common: they don’t believe that they belong to the body. For Mr. Foot, it’s because he’s not a hand. He doesn’t have the fine motor skills of a hand. He can’t type, or draw, or hold, or use tools. He’s often out of sight because he’s covered with footwear, and sometimes he smells. Mrs. Ear doesn’t believe she’s part of the body because she’s not an eye. She doesn’t perceive the world through sight. No one’s writing poems about her because she doesn’t have colour like the eyes do, and she’s not located in the prime position of the front of the face but on the sides of the head.

Both Mr. Foot and Mrs. Ear feel that they don’t belong to the body because they’re not like the body parts that seem to be more important.

Perhaps you feel the same. You look around and you see your brothers and sisters in Christ singing so beautifully or speaking so eloquently or praying so passionately, and you think, “I’m not like that. I could never be like that, and that means I can never truly belong.”

Paul has four responses to this. The first is that, in one sense, it doesn’t matter what you believe about yourself. You’re still part of the body:

**14**For the body does not consist of one member but of many. **15**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. **16**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.

He says to both Mr. Foot and Mrs. Ear that thinking that they do not belong to the body does not make them any less a part of the body. They’re part of the body whether they like it or not! What they believe about themselves is irrelevant. If their trust is in Christ, the one Spirit has baptized them into one body, and no doubts or struggles can change that.

Second, Paul appeals to the unique functions of the parts of the body:

**17**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?

Paul says to the Mr. Foots and Mrs. Ears of the world, “Don’t just think about what you don’t have. Think about what you *do* have.” Mr. Foot, you may not be able to type on a keyboard or play a violin, but you can stand. You can walk. You can run. The body wouldn’t be able to move without you. And Mrs. Ear, you may not be able to see, but you can hear. People may not admire you, but you’re the one who makes it possible for people to have conversations.

Every part of the body has a purpose, which leads to Paul’s third response in verse 18:

**18**But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.

God is the one who designed the body, and God is the one who designs the church. Notice the emphasis on God’s careful attention to detail. God “arranged the members in the body, *each one of them*, as *he chose*.” He didn’t make any mistakes. He didn’t add extra parts that don’t serve a purpose. He has carefully chosen each and every part and arranged them according to his divine wisdom. That means that if you say you don’t belong, or you have nothing to offer, you’re not just saying something about yourself. You’re saying something about God. You’re saying that God made a mistake, but he never makes mistakes.

Paul’s fourth response highlights just how silly it is to think like Mr. Foot and Mrs. Ear:

**19**If all were a single member, where would the body be? **20**As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

Everyone knows that you don’t have a body if you have a pile of eyeballs or a heap of feet, and yet that’s exactly what we’re saying when we say we can’t be part of the body if we’re not like the people around us. The body of Christ doesn’t just need a lot of eyeballs or a lot of feet. Nor does it just need a lot of mouths. I say that as one of the mouths in our church. It’s great to be a mouth, to be a herald of God’s Word, but people only come to listen because so many of you have been at work as the hands and feet and heart.

We need each other, because there are many parts, yet one body. And if we don’t have many parts, we don’t have a body at all.

(3) **CHANGING THE WAY THAT WE SEE OTHERS**

Lastly, we need to change the way that we see others. Verse 21:

**21**The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.”

This group of people is very different from the first group. If the first group thought, “The church doesn’t need me”, this second group thought, “I don’t need the church.” If the first group doubted whether they belonged with others, this second group doubted whether others belonged with them.

They’re two very different groups of people. One struggled with self-esteem, the other struggled with self-sufficiency, and yet the result in the church is the same: isolation and division. It doesn’t matter if you’re hiding in the background because you lack self-esteem, or you’re pushing people away because you have too much of it. The result of both is the weakening of the body and the absence of unity.

But whereas the first group needed to change the way that they saw themselves, this second group needed to change the way that they saw others. Paul addresses that in verses 22-24:

**22**On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, **23**and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, **24**which our more presentable parts do not require.

Paul is giving us a window into the mind of God. What we see as weak, God sees as indispensable. What we see as deserving less honour, God bestows the greater honour. This is how God works. This is his *modus operandi*. Paul told us about it in Chapter 1 when he said that God could have called anyone to himself. He could have chosen anyone to make up the church, the precious bride of his Son. And who did he choose?

“But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.” – 1 Corinthians 1:27-29

God chose the weak so that no one would boast in his presence. Verse 25 gives us another reason:

“But God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, **25** that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.”

There is an inextricable connection between what you honour and what you care for. If you don’t care about the body, it means that you don’t value it. If you don’t care about the weak, the obscure, the hidden parts of the body, it means that you don’t think they’re worthy of honour. But God honours them. He even reserves the greater honour for them. So if we are to honour what God honours, we are to honour and care for the members of the body, especially those that are seen to be weak.

Unity doesn’t just mean the absence of conflict or division. It means the presence of mutual care for the strong, and for the weak. It means caring for the entire body, because the parts can’t be healthy if the body isn’t healthy.

Our text today ends with a final picture of unity in verse 26:

**26**If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

Anthony Thiselton illustrates this well when he writes:

“We do not say to a victorious runner, ‘I congratulate your legs’; congratulations go to *the person*. Success results from the conjoint coordination of *all* the limbs of the body. Conversely, pain or damage in a specific body part can drag down the health of the whole psychological system. The *person* becomes unwell.” – Anthony Thiselton

When I get really bad allergies, I don’t just say, “Poor sinuses” and carry on because the rest of my body is fine. I’m sprawled on the couch completely incapacitated. Or when I win a board game against my kids, my legs don’t get jealous of my brain. I rejoice as one person. In the same way, the body of Christ is meant to suffer and rejoice together, weeping with those who weep, and rejoicing with those who rejoice.

**CONCLUSION**

So what’s keeping you from living as a member of the body of Christ? It may be because you’re not a Christian. You can’t be part of the body of Christ if you haven’t put your trust in Christ. But when you feel God calling you, and you decide to trust in him, believing that the Son of God died for your sins and rose again by the will of God the Father and the power of God the Spirit, your life will be completely transformed. You’ll no longer belong to yourself, but to him, which is wonderfully freeing, because we were never meant to be the gods of our own lives. We were meant to live in fellowship with God and with his people. So I invite you to come to him, put your trust in Christ, and become part of his body.

For my fellow believers, God calls you today to honour and care for one another, not just those who are highly esteemed by the world, but those who are highly esteemed by God. Don’t just seek out those who are like you. Seek out those who are *not* like you. Care for the weak, for those who have illnesses, or disabilities, or special needs; for those who are poor, or marginalized, or forgotten; for those who don’t seem to have much to offer but who have been chosen by God for a purpose.

Be on the lookout for those who sit by themselves. Go to them, sit with them, invite them into your homes. None who belong to Christ should be alone. All should be welcomed, honoured, and cared for, because whatever you do for the least of the brothers and sisters of Christ, you do for him.

May the body of Christ here at Sovereign Grace Church grow strong as the individual organs and limbs grow strong through the mutual care and honour that we give to one another.