

“TO THE CHURCH OF GOD – CHRISTIANS TOGETHER”

10. WORKING TOGETHER

1 Corinthians 12:12 – 13:13

We’re continuing to look at this letter which St Paul wrote to a local church nearly two thousand years ago and to all local churches down through the centuries. The church in Corinth, like all local churches was made up of a great variety of different people – people with different backgrounds, different personalities, different gifts, different expectations and aspirations and problems and anxieties. As we’ve noted over the past few weeks, Paul is responding to various questions he has received from the members of the church in Corinth, as well as picking up on some of the reports he’s heard from particular individuals there.

The bustling seaport of Corinth provided a backdrop to the church, a culture and context within which we have to see the group of new Christians who were the original recipients of the letter. The Greco-Roman society of the first century (particularly in Corinth) was one in which individualism, self-gratification and the cult of celebrity were hallmarks – very much like today. And in that culture, where the new church was called to be a radically distinctive community, many of the new Christians were struggling to make sense of it all. They didn’t necessarily have very much in common with each other, apart from their shared faith in Jesus Christ, but they needed to work together if they were to have any hope of making an impact on the city in which they found themselves.

A couple of weeks ago we saw that God, through his Holy Spirit, had given them all gifts and abilities which they could use in his service. In his sovereign grace he gave gifts to each individual for the good of the whole church. There was no suggestion that these gifts were given for personal kudos and no-one was to appropriate any of the gifts for his or her own personal gain. But just as they were all very different people, so they all had very different but complementary gifts. The great need now was to learn to work together as a church, so Paul moves on to explain something of what they are to do with the gifts they’ve been given, gifts of prophecy, administration, healing, teaching, speaking in tongues and so on.

He takes up a well-known image to help them see where he’s going with it all – the image of the body. It was a well-known image even then for talking about corporate affairs, as it still is today. Just think of the various ways in which we use the vocabulary of the body to talk about communal things – “the body politic”, “the arm of the law”, “the heart of the community”, “the ear of Parliament” and so on. So Paul takes this image and applies it to the church, explaining that the church is actually “*the body of Christ*”. It’s quite an awesome concept if you stop and think about it. As Michael Green writes (in *To Corinth With Love*), “*The church is not a building, not a voluntary society, not an optional extra at the end of a busy week. It is the Body of Christ.*” And he continues by saying that “*The Body means the visible expression of Christ*”. Christians – the new converts in Corinth, and you and I – make Christ visible in the community where they are based. And we are all baptised into that body (v13), we become part of it when we commit ourselves to Christ. We are in it together. So what does Paul tell us follows from that? There are four things here.

1. INFERIORITY (vv14-20)

The first two things are to be avoided. Paul is stressing that every individual part of the body is necessary for the overall functioning of the whole. So there is no way in which the foot could say it didn’t feel it belonged because it wasn’t as visible or elegant as the hand. The ear cannot say that it isn’t part of the body because it’s tucked away to one side and doesn’t twinkle as beautifully as the eye. Without the ear and the foot, the body could not function as it is designed to. God has put the body together in such a way that every part is needed and no part can be dispensed with.

And that is just like the church, he says. In the body of Christ, every part is necessary in some way and at some time. There is no reason for anyone to feel inferior or left out. We shouldn’t be looking around at

each other and saying, “Well, I don’t have his gifts, so I’m not needed”, or “Nobody wants me because I can’t do what she can”. There’s a kind of inherent jealousy in that and it is to be avoided at all costs. Every one of us here this morning has something to contribute to the life of the church and to start complaining that you don’t feel needed because people don’t make enough fuss of you, or because what you do isn’t high profile enough is to miss completely the point of being Christians together.

For some people the gift that they’ve been given is something that will be exercised in a fairly visible, high-profile way – preaching, leading worship, sorting out the things that are seen by many people each week. For other people, their gifts may well be exercised in private – prayer, writing little notes of encouragement, sorting out the things that no-one ever sees – but without which we could not function. In this church our life together would be impoverished if there was no-one to play the music each week and if there was no-one to clean the toilets, no-one to greet you at the door and no-one to sit quietly in a Sunday School group to ensure that we comply with child protection legislation, no-one to operate the PowerPoint slides and no-one to print the songsheets. If everyone was called to be a preacher or a musician or a public pray-er, who would do the other things that are also necessary. Look at what gifts God has given you, and do them to the very best of your ability without constantly wanting to do what someone else is doing. Thank God that he has included you in his plan for this place. As the Psalmist puts it in *Psalm 84*, “*I’d rather scrub floors in the house of my God than be honoured as a guest in the palace of sin*” (*Psalm 84:10* The Message). There should be no inferiority complexes as far as the body of Christ is concerned. And don’t forget – it’s God you’re serving and he sees it all, whether other people notice or not.

2. SUPERIORITY (vv21-25)

Of course, there’s the opposite – and equally wrong attitude – that some adopt as well. Some people in Corinth were of the opinion that they could cope without the people who didn’t have such obvious gifts as they did. In the body, says Paul, you don’t get some parts saying that they can do without the others. There was a fable in ancient literature about this very thing (which Paul may have had in mind here). Some of the more attractive and obvious parts of the body – the eye, the hands, the mouth – felt that they could dispense with the need for a stomach, because it was hidden away. And they felt it was quite rightly hidden away because it was unattractive and rather unpleasant in many ways. So they ignored it and decided not to use it. It wasn’t long before they realised that the stomach was pretty indispensable because it was only via the stomach that the rest of the body could be fed and so survive. That’s probably partly what lies behind Paul’s words here about the “*less honourable*” parts.

In the body of Christ no-one has the right to say that anyone else is not needed, to look down on others and dismiss them as unnecessary or unhelpful because of their gifts. If God has called someone into his church, if they are part of the body of Christ, then they have a part to play, even if that part isn’t immediately obvious. As this congregation here grows there is no way that everyone can know what everyone else is doing (much as some of you might like to!).

You may see people here Sunday by Sunday and wonder just what the point of some of them is, but they are the people who do all kinds of things behind the scenes or on occasions when you are not present, without which this church would simply cease to function. We’ve mentioned some of the things in passing already, but there are many, many more, from checking that there’s enough tea and coffee in the kitchen cupboards, to printing the weekly notice sheets, to ensuring that the communion table is always prepared, to organising the books in the church library. Now, you can’t necessarily know all these people personally, but that doesn’t mean that you should ignore them or assume that they aren’t needed. An attitude of superiority in the body of Christ is just as unhelpful as an attitude of inferiority.

But it isn’t all negative. Paul goes on to write about the more positive aspects of all this, reminding the Corinthians that there are huge benefits from recognising that they are all in it together, that they all have

an indispensable part to play in the smooth functioning of the body of Christ, and therefore in his mission where he has called them to be.

3. MUTUALITY (vv26,27)

At the end of v25, Paul writes that the parts of the body of Christ “*should have equal concern for each other*”. I don’t think he’s saying here that everyone should know everyone else – that just wasn’t possible in a congregation that was growing and could be very mobile, such as the church in Corinth. What he is saying is that there is a mutuality in the life of the church which means that the whole is affected by the individual parts. So, as he goes on to say, if one part is having a bad time, then others feel the pain too. And if one part gets specially honoured, everyone else joins in the celebration.

That’s often very difficult to achieve when we’re together in worship. There will be some who have come into church to praise God and offer him lively and exuberant worship because they’ve had a good week. Others will turn up weighed down by problems and anxieties, wondering just what God’s playing at – and they won’t feel able to join in the praise of the others. But that doesn’t mean that we don’t take the opportunity to encourage and build up one another as part of the life of the church. We need each other –in different ways and at different times – because we’re all in this together.

And that’s what pastoral care in church is all about – trying to ensure that no-one is overlooked, that we are able to share together in the good things and the bad. In an ideal world that would happen without any need for a structure: people would form their own informal networks and demonstrate their care for each other as they shared their news and their gifts. But there’s also a need for a “safety net”, if you like – someone just to turn to if there’s a particular problem or the usual networks aren’t quite functioning as we’d like. Again, we’re all different, so there’s always going to someone who feels they don’t quite fit in and they need special care. As we recognise that “*each one is a part of [the body of Christ]*” (v27), we should start to take a bit more responsibility for each other.

4. DIVERSITY (vv28-31)

Paul rounds off this section by reminding the Corinthians (and us) once again that, just as we are all different people, we all have different gifts. That’s natural and that’s necessary. There’s no one gift that should be expected by everyone and so we all need each other. There’s a great diversity in the people in a congregation and in their gifts and abilities. Paul lists a few here, some of which he’s already mentioned earlier in chapter 12 and some of which are mentioned only here. The point is not about the individual gifts, but about the fact that there are many different ones.

And they are not all found in one person: nor, as we’ve said, is any of them found in every Christian. The questions which he asks in vv29,30 are all introduced in Greek with a little word (μή) which implies a negative answer. That doesn’t quite translate here in the NIV, but it might be better to phrase the questions as “*Not all are apostles, are they? You’re not all prophets, are you?*” and so on.

That’s what makes the body of Christ such a wonderful channel of God’s grace to the community we’re in – the sheer diversity of the gifts that the Holy Spirit hands out. That’s what makes it such fun. And that’s what makes it so frustrating at times, too!

Which is why Paul goes off into this wonderful chapter 13. For most of us it’s probably something we hear read at weddings and other such occasions. It’s a lovely, poetic hymn to love and we feel a warm glow of sentimentality creep over us as we sit there listening to it. But it is certainly not a sentimental passage. And it’s not about the romantic love that’s to the fore on wedding days. As you have probably heard many times before, there are different words in Greek for love and the one that is used here (αγάπη) is the most challenging. It means sacrificial love, love that gives everything with no thought of

return. And Paul is saying that this is what underpins all our life together as Christians. We may well have all the gifts we could possibly hope for, we may have abilities that make us cleverer or saintlier or holier than everyone else in the church, we may have been here longer, been more involved in the church and the community, been more battle scarred by evil and more honoured by God than anyone else, but if we don't have any love, it's all a waste of time. This is no soppy, soft-focussed poem about warm and tender love. This is a tremendously challenging and motivating passage that we all need to read and reflect on regularly.

In the light of what we've been thinking about this morning, just re-read vv4-7. Church life – in first century Corinth, in twenty-first century Lichfield – is great: I wouldn't want to swap it for anything. But it's also messy, frustrating, far from perfect – and that's because it's made up of people, people who don't quite see things the way you do, people who make mistakes, people who have all kinds of emotional and psychological baggage, people who have ambitions and people who have fears, people who are being slowly changed to be like Jesus Christ – and you wish they'd change a bit quicker! But we're all in this together. We all have things we can contribute to the life of the church and we all have things we need to get from the life of the church. And if we are to get along together, and if we are to make progress as God wants us to, and if we are to be that “*church at the heart of the city with Christ at the heart of the church*”, then we need to come back again and again to this chapter. I'm not going to pull it all apart this morning and try to explain it – most of it is as clear as daylight. The difficulty is not in **understanding** – the difficulty is in **doing**. May God fill us with his Holy Spirit as we attempt to live out Paul's words.

Discussion notes on next page

"TO THE CHURCH OF GOD – CHRISTIANS TOGETHER"
10. WORKING TOGETHER 1 Corinthians 12:12 – 13:13

The great need for the Christians in Corinth was to learn to work together as a church, so Paul moves on to explain something of what they are to do with the gifts they've been given. He takes up a well-known image to help them see where he's going with it all – the image of the body which he applies to the church, explaining that the church is actually *"the body of Christ"*. Michael Green writes (in *To Corinth With Love*), *"The church is not a building, not a voluntary society, not an optional extra at the end of a busy week. It is the Body of Christ ... The Body means the visible expression of Christ"*. Christians make Christ visible in the community where they are based.

1. INFERIORITY (vv14-20)

In the body of Christ, every part is necessary in some way and at some time. There is no reason for anyone to feel inferior or left out. Thank God that he has included you in his plan for this place. *"I'd rather scrub floors in the house of my God than be honoured as a guest in the palace of sin"* (Psalm 84:10 The Message). Don't forget – it's God you're serving and he sees it all, whether other people notice or not.

2. SUPERIORITY (vv21-25)

But some people in Corinth were of the opinion that they could cope without the people who didn't have such obvious gifts as they did. In the body of Christ no-one has the right to say that anyone else is not needed, to look down on others and dismiss them as unnecessary or unhelpful because of their gifts.

3. MUTUALITY (vv26,27)

There is a mutuality in the life of the church which means that the whole is affected by the individual parts. So if one part is having a bad time, then others feel the pain too. And if one part gets specially honoured, everyone else joins in the celebration. That's what pastoral care in church is all about – trying to ensure that no-one is overlooked, that we are able to share together in the good things and the bad. As we recognise that *"each one is a part of [the body of Christ]"* (v27), we should start to take a bit more responsibility for each other.

4. DIVERSITY (vv28-31)

Just as we are all different people, we all have different gifts. There's a great diversity in the people in a congregation and in their gifts and abilities. That's what makes the body of Christ such a wonderful channel of God's grace to the community we're in – the sheer diversity of the gifts that the Holy Spirit hands out. That's what makes it such fun. And that's what makes it so frustrating at times, too!

Which is why Paul goes off into this wonderful chapter 13. It is certainly not a sentimental passage. And it's not about romantic love but sacrificial love, love that gives everything with no thought of return. And Paul is saying that this is what underpins all our life together as Christians. In the light of what Paul writes in chapter 12 re-read 12:4-7. Church life is messy, frustrating, far from perfect – and that's because it's made up of people who are being slowly changed to be like Jesus Christ – and you wish they'd change a bit quicker! But we're all in this together. We all have things we can contribute to the life of the church and we all have things we need to get from the life of the church. And if we are to get along together, and if we are to make progress as God wants us to, and if we are to be that *"church at the heart of the city with Christ at the heart of the church"*, then we need to come back again and again to this chapter. The difficulty is not in **understanding** – the difficulty is in **doing**.

Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think some people see their gifts as "inferior" to others? What can be done about it?
2. Are **all** the gifts always present in a church? What should we do if some obvious ones are missing? Does it matter?
3. As a church grows, it becomes more difficult for everyone to know everyone else. How can we come to terms with this? How can we encourage people to care for each other effectively?
4. In 12:28 Paul appears to rank the gifts he mentions. Do you think that is the case? Why/why not?
5. Why is love so important in the life of the church?
6. Re-read chapter 13 in the light of chapter 12. What do you find most challenging about it?