

The Function of the Church

1 Corinthians 12

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TRANSCRIPT:

Turn with me, if you will, to the book of 1 Corinthians, chapter 12, starting at verse 1:

"Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant. You know that you were Gentiles, carried away to these dumb idols, however you were led. Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills. For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many. If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body,' is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body,' is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And 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.' No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater

honor; and our unrepresentable parts have greater modesty, but our representable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way."

Father, we come to You recognizing that the church is Your body. And so we pray that You would send the Holy Spirit to awaken Your church to understand who she is and how she ought to function in a way that is pleasing in Your sight. We ask these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

The book of 1 Corinthians is predominantly corrective. The Apostle Paul was dealing with many problems that were arising in that church. These problems divided the church and could be reduced down to two main fundamental issues. One is that they were exalting men and personalities above the truth of God, saying, "I am of Paul," "I am of Peter," "I am of Christ," "I'm of Apollos." And Paul goes on to say, "Is Christ divided?" once again reminding them that they are the body of Christ.

The other issue was the way they handled their spiritual gifts. There was a man-centeredness, a showiness. They employed the gifts that had been graciously given to them by God for their own glory and for status in the life of the church. In chapter 12, Paul arrives at that point to deal with their pride in regards to these things and to set things in order with regards to how the church should function. Paul begins by helping them realize that the church is none other than a ministering body. And when I say ministering body, Paul does not mean a ministering entity, but he actually means a ministering body like your body and my body. That's the analogy he's pointing to here. He wants the believers to understand that their views of the church will impact the way that they function in the church. So if they think of the church as being primarily about personality types and about which preacher, for example, you are a follower of, then you will find that it will just destroy the way in which they carry out their gifted ministry in the life of the church. Paul helps them understand and tries to correct their thinking ultimately by helping them recenter their attention on what the church is and therefore out of that talk about the church's function.

So he begins with the church's function in verses 1 to 11 and then talks

about the body, showing that it's meant to function as a body because you are a body. And this is how he makes his case. And the problem that the believers there had in Corinth is relevant to us even today because the way that we think about the church will affect the way that we function in the church. You see, for many believers today, they believe that the church, yes, they'll affirm, is a body. I don't think I've ever met anyone who said it's not a body. We're not talking about what is affirmed; we're talking about what is believed and then expressed in our lives. But many people believe that the church is a preaching center. Of course, the word is central to the life of the church. Everything that happens in the church is to be informed by the word and is to be for the preaching and exaltation and for the meditating upon the word. But the church is not an education center or a place merely where you come to get a pep talk to recharge your batteries for the week, although preaching will definitely stir you up and recharge you, but that is not the sum and substance of the church. The church neither is a building where religious activities basically happen, although they do happen as we gather and we thankfully can gather in a building. But it is not a building primarily. That is just a place where we choose to gather. Whether we gather in a park or at a tree or in homes as the early church did due to persecution and the likes, it would not change the nature of the church one bit. Some people think of the church as a building and therefore they come to get their blessing, as it were, for the week and to go on then. For them, it's about encounters with God through the aesthetics of the worship service. For others, they perceive the church to be an entertainment center where it is really about the performance of an hour to satisfy the consumer's likes and hunger. Others believe the church to be a business organization where the ultimate goal is increasing membership, increasing revenue, and therefore the emphasis of the church lays upon the methodologies and how we market the church. Others believe it to be a political entity where it's a place of political activism and social change, and that this is the place where we all need to share the same political identity about beliefs and ideologies about everything and go out together and protest. Now although the church may be employed in a variety of these various things in different ways, the problem with each of these things is that it undermines the function of a body. And of all the things that I've just mentioned, a handful of very gifted people can produce those sort of outcomes without the rest of the people that are a part of that organization. But not so with the church, says Paul.

And Paul helps the Corinthians to understand that the nature of the church speaks to its function, so that in whatever way that the church functions, it has to be consistent with its nature. This is very important because it shows us that all the things God creates, He creates with purposeful design that tells us what they're meant for. So for example, in creation, you see a bird, and a bird is made to fly by very nature. What do you mean by very

nature? Well, it has wings, it has feathers, its bones are hollow so that it's light so that it can take off and continue to soar and to fly through the air. It has got eyesight different to ours so that it can see more precisely from higher places and planes. And therefore, just by examining and observing the nature of a bird, you know what the bird ought to do. And so it is with everything in life; we could even go so down to the minute thing like a human that designs a pen. A pen has a tube, ink, a hollow point with a ball at the bottom. It's made to be held, it's made to be marked, and by the way, just in case you didn't know, it's not meant to be chewed. And that is because it is by its very nature and by its very design, it demands certain function, as with the bird, as with everything in life. This is part of God's wisdom and His creation that is seen in man and in how he creates things also.

And so Paul uses an analogy here that reminds the church of their very nature so as to inform their function, and he uses a very vital analogy here, and that is the analogy of a body, which we read of in verse 12 through to verse 27. And he shows that the body, one of the main things concerning the body that Paul wants to bring out for our understanding, is that the body is a unified living organism of which every part in the body is necessary. And therefore, he's showing that there is unity that ought to exist in the body because every part of the body is necessary. And so there's a unity of belief with regards to the church, or there should be spiritually. In verse four to verse six, He talks about the same Spirit in verse four, the same Lord, and He talks about the same God—the same Spirit, the same Lord, the same God—that is both energizing, empowering, giving, working in that same body. So there's an agreement in the Trinity with regards to how He works in the body to produce the manifestation of the Spirit and the function of gifts in the body. But they are to therefore then believe the same Spirit, the same Lord, and the same God so that they'll be informed by the Trinity.

Not only that, in verse number 13, he reminds the church that they by one Spirit were baptized into one body, and you will see language all the way through of that idea of one—many but one, one, one, the same one—showing that the body is a unified body; that is what makes our body function so well. And not only is there a unity of relationship to the things that are believed, but to one another. You see, Paul doesn't say to one is given this and to one that and to one that, to one and another, showing that it's like this, as it were, this chain where we're all connected together, and He gives one to one, one to another, one to another, and we form, as it were, this body whereby every part is important, and there is a unity of relationship—the body is dependent upon itself. That's essentially what the idea is here. There's a unified dependency on all of the body so that all of the body may function, every part of it. All you have to do is ask a carpenter or a la-

borer or someone who's been working, as it were, very physically and has not cared for every part of their body. You know, they despise the instruction of wearing headphones in loud and noisy places, or the knees, they thought, "Forget the knee pads, takes too long." I used to do that when I was painting and just drop down, you know, just walking around; it's annoying because they get in your way, the knee pads. And over time, what ends up happening is your knees start wearing, your ears start, your hearing starts going, and later on, you see, ah, it's very necessary to protect the knees and to protect the hearing because although everything else works fine—I can still cut a straight line when cutting in my painting, or although I can still nail the hammer, the nail in perfectly and right—yet the rest of my body is aching, and it affects the whole. So that I cannot work like I used to as the years have gone on, and I did not give necessary attention to the whole.

And so you see this interdependence even in the human body, which Paul is using so as to explain to us that. And then he shows, therefore, that there's a unity of interdependence, but there's a unity of goal and mission. And in verse number 25, he says that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another, and there's that concept of one another again, and there should be the same care for one another. Therefore, every part of the body ought to understand that it has a goal and a mission to care for one another. And also, what is mentioned here is that every part of the body is to function for the benefit of one another. Look at verse number 7 of chapter 12: "But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all." The unity and goal of the church is so that the entire church will be edified, and that the entire church will be cared for because every part is taking on the function that God has given to it to do, and therefore there is that unity of goal and mission.

But in all the unity, Paul does not want the church to forget the individuality of each person that forms the whole. Because although the body is one, it is made up of many, and to each one, the Bible says, God gives gifts, and to each one, they have a particular function. And so there is a way to view the body in such a way that you iron out every difference, and so therefore, in one sense, the whole body either becomes an eye or thinks that the eye is the only thing that is important, and the rest just sit back and do nothing, thinking, "I have nothing to do in the body." And some people will press unity so far because they are afraid of diversity to the point that the entire body will not function as it ought, but it will just tunnel right to the pyramid at the top. But Paul says no. Each person is unique, different, and ought to be honored as such. As long as they are unified in those things that we spoke about in terms of what we mentioned in their goal and mission, in their belief, and that. The body is diverse, each unique means

the function individually. That is true of natural things; look with me then briefly in verse number 13. That is true of natural things, of one spirit baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free. Doesn't matter about occupation, race, even gender in other passages like Galatians chapter 3. These things are not to be points of division in the body, but they are meant to be embraced diversities, realizing that every kind of person from a different kind of background, even the natural things, have been brought into one body by one spirit and therefore ought to be honored despite their differences and to function in a way that is consistent with a body.

But also of spiritual things, and that is particularly what this context is about, in verse number 4 through to verse number 6. Because in that passage where he speaks of there being the same spirit, the same Lord, and it's the same God, it is all preceded by the same word, which could be translated as diversities or differences. Verse 4: "There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. There are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all." So the same Lord, the same spirit, the same God are the ones that have given to the body the differences. The differences of gifts, the differences of services or ministries, the way in which those gifts are expressed, and the difference of activities, which is the word *energia*, which is the idea of differences of empowerment. So for one, they may be a more empowered or gifted teacher than another, or vice versa, in different ways among all the gifts that I mentioned here in this text. But to each a given, which is the individuality, and there's individual gifts that are given to individuals, and you have different ministries and activities, which are the aspect of individuality is meant to come in and work as a whole. And therefore, there's a uniqueness of expression regarding everyone's gift in the body of Christ.

Now, what are some considerations regarding the function of the body? Well, the first thing we realize in this passage is that the church is to function by her gifts. The church is to function by her gifts. Think about that statement just a little bit; it's meant to function by her gifts. Look at verse number four of this passage: "There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit." This entire passage regards "now concerning spiritual gifts," and therefore, it is by the gifts of the spirit that the church is to operate; it is by her gifts that the church is to function, and therefore, God distributes—listen to this—to each one gifts. But what is the Lord trying to say by that? That the church is meant to operate by the involvement of every single part because God Himself has given to every single believer gifts for the functioning of the whole. And the church is to operate through the gifts. Now, I'm going to explain this as we go on a little bit more. This is part of the spiritual nature of the church.

Okay, look at verse number five: "There are differences of ministries, but

the same Lord." Now, what are the ministries here? Well, we cannot divorce it from the passage above because this is all about spiritual gifts. The ministries or the services are the manifestations of the gifts, right? So you serve according to your giftedness. This is the idea. God gives you gifts so that you can serve the body by your gifts, through your gifts. This is what God's doing. You have one body made up of individuals with particular gifts so that the church can operate by reason of everybody functioning according to their giftedness. This is the application of the gifts through service. That is very clear by the list of gifts that are given here as well and how they are meant to profit all, to benefit the whole. Look at verse number seven again: "But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all." Now, without bogging us down in this too much, the gifts are the manifestation of the Spirit. This is what Paul's wanting them to understand. That God adds people to the body, gifts people within the body, and moves them by the manifestation of the Spirit to exercise their gifts in the body. This is not too complicated.

This teaches us something that's very important. It teaches us this: that formal platforms and organized events and ministries, and listen to these words, are not necessary for service. I'm not saying that there are not ministries in which people serve that are formal. Of course, that's part of the order and structure of the church. But if you think in terms of the fact that your ministering can only be done through formal ministries as we know them today of the church, then you have missed the entire thing that Paul is saying here. It is gifts that produce service in the life of the church. Yes, of course, through formal ministries, as is being preached to, as someone's leading the singing, as people play instruments, as whatever it may be. But it is not the only place where the body serves. It is not the only time when the body serves. You can see how this can be problematic, right, in the life of a church. Because if you view the church as those things which make up the formal ministries of the church, then you reduce the activities of the church and the manifestation of the Spirit in the church to those particular organized events and to those alone. But the church is a living organism that exists outside of the times of the gathered assemblies. And she is made up of more people than can occupy a pulpit, and she is made up of more people than can occupy every ministry. And therefore, when the church is viewed as a body, you realize that my ministry is to one another. So what is necessary for my service is not organized ministries but people. And therefore, as long as there are people, there is ministry. And as long as the Spirit is moving in my life and I'm yielded to Him, He will lead me to people that I might exercise my gifts to people, among people. Whether it be in a Bible study, for example, on a Tuesday night. Whether it be even here on a Sunday morning in fellowship one with another, or throughout the week as you gather together in homes and visit one another and pray for one another, or whatever it may be, the body is functioning as an inte-

grated network, unified body where every individual is necessary.

For example, gifted teachers don't all need a pulpit. You can gather three, four people in your house and open the Bible and share God's Word with them. You can, around your dinner table, open the Bible and teach God's Word. Helpers in the church don't need the title of a deacon to serve. You can serve anybody in the body at any time. You can manifest your gifts of help. For those who, in the charismatic world, have their healing services, they're not required to express gifts of healings. Giving—those that have the gift of giving—they do not require formal financial appeals before they can act. They can give as they are moved by the Holy Spirit to the needs of others in the body. Those who have the gift of mercy, as it were, and like to display acts of kindness to others, do not need to wait for a soup kitchen to exercise that gift. I'm not saying we can't do soup kitchens; I would love to see something like that happen more practically in the world, in the city, out there to evangelize and other things. But understand this, and understand this very clearly, that your limitations in service are not restricted to the formal ministries. God has gifted you, or individually as believers, for the functioning of the body—all of it. And therefore, all of you are necessary.

Every single one of you that belong to Camden Valley Baptist Church are necessary for the function and operation of Camden Valley Baptist Church. And the goal of gifting is the edification of the body, which means that the building up of the body is the work of the whole. Ephesians 4 talks about, yes, those that are appointed for that, but the body edifies itself in love. Yes, He gave some apostles, some prophets, some pastors, some teachers, but to equip the saints for the work of the ministry, so the body may edify itself in love. And therefore, what Paul does in this passage is breaks down the envy that existed regarding their differences. He says, just because one person has this kind of gift and it's a more dominant gift and he occupies a certain ministry, it doesn't mean that someone who doesn't occupy that certain ministry and hasn't got that same dynamic empowerment or whatever it may be by the Holy Spirit is any less for the importance of the function of the body. Every part's important. Eye, ears, nose, mouth, hands, feet—you name it. And therefore, just like a symphony orchestra requires all the instruments to play in harmony and symphony with one another for the expression of that wonderful piece that has been put together to be played, so it is in the church.

And it would be foolish if the trombone player looked at the lead violinist and said, "Man, that guy's got front stage. I'm just at the back, you know, a couple of times throughout the whole thing." Or the percussionist in the pit that nobody sees. And the rest keep playing, and you see them all on stage, and then every now and again, and you don't see him, he's in the pit, he's hidden from the sight of all, and he can say, "Look at the cello,

mate, going nice and deep there, playing next to the violinist, and everyone's seeing and looking on, and when they applaud, I'm not even in—they don't even get to see my face." Well, what Paul says, "What if the whole orchestra was a cello? Where would the drummer be? What if the whole orchestra were a violin?" Right? "Where would the—you name it—be?" But God has set every part in the body according to as He wills and has given gifts to the body in accordance to how He wills, as it says in verse number 11, and therefore, instead of looking at the violinist or at the cello player and comparing one another and saying, "I wish I was like that," realize that you are just as important.

And so Paul says in verse number 20 and verse 21, he says in this passage of Scripture, he says, "But now indeed there are many members, yet one body," and this is the point. Even though there are many members and there's this diversity and individuality and this uniqueness about everything that we do in the body, he's saying you are actually one body. So guess this: when the symphony orchestra gets the applaud, you all get the applaud. You cannot conclude that you are of no need if you are part of the body. This is what he's trying to say. You cannot say, "I am of no need to the body," because I'm not this part. He's saying the body is one, but it's many. And because it's one, every part's important, and we cannot do without any of the parts of the body. And therefore, Paul goes on to argue that we should rejoice when one person rejoices because when that person rejoices, the whole body should rejoice with it because that one person is part of the body, and in one sense, they all share in the joy of the body. And when one member suffers in the body and is hurt, or there, for example, even in a team, a player makes a bad move, the whole team cops it together and says, "Hey, it's all good." Not, "You made us lose," "We lost. We lost."

I love what Chrysostom said; he says, "The head is crowned, and the whole man is honored." The head is crowned, but the whole man is honored. And Paul's saying, then, be done with envy in the body, be thankful, and serve in whatever way God has given you in the body because every person in the body is necessary by God's design for the function of the body, and all envy does is it undermines the analogy of the body. Do you know what envy does? It basically says, "God, You've designed the body in a way that's not good. You should have made us all eyes. You should have made us all feet. You should have made us all hands." And when we grumble and complain about the certain gifts that we have, about the certain ministries that God has given us with regards to them, we have to remember that it's the Spirit that gives us these things, and therefore, we are to do them as unto the Lord. For the body is one.

Now, there are unavoidable challenges to this text that arise out of the text. The first being, how do you and I view the Church of God? As a body or as a

business? Do we view it as something that may be carried out by the work of a few, or do we understand the church in terms of a body in which every single part is needed for the function of the whole? I'm afraid for many of God's people, the church is being reduced to, as I said, the activities of a few, and therefore, others are happy, as it were, to put their hands behind their back or in their pocket and do nothing for the kingdom of God, for the sake of other brothers and sisters in the life of the church. How do we see ourselves in the life of the church? As unimportant, as unnecessary, as disposable, or indispensable? Because what Paul's saying here to us, what God's telling us here, is that none of the body is indispensable. All the body is necessary for the function of the whole; therefore, all should be involved in the life of the body for the function of the body.

How have we been viewing, as it were, gifts, as it were, and the expression of gifts in the life of the church? Have we been seeing them as manifestations of the Spirit, or are we seeing them as merely as things that we would just like to do? Are we thinking in terms of people? Are we thinking in terms of the Spirit working in our lives to bless and benefit and edify the whole? Or are we thinking in terms of status? Or are we thinking in terms of applaud? Or we thinking in terms of, as it were, business, where we have to rise, as it were, to a top? What top? It's a body. Every part is necessary for the function of the whole.

Maybe we've been limiting the manifestation of the Spirit to formal assemblies alone. Therefore, you may think this morning, "Well, I can't serve in the church," because you're thinking of the church as what happens here for an hour and a half, as it were, on a Sunday morning, and not seeing it as a living organism that exists and requires care and requires rejoicing and weeping and serving and repairing all throughout the week long. We need to beware of the danger of an institutionalized view of the church that polarizes the body, that restricts the gifts to a few, and that makes God's people sit as passengers in a plane and go on, "Pilot, take us to our destination," and go on, "Waitresses, serve us till we arrive." But we're not passengers in a plane. We are a body. We are to function and connect and integrate and be working as God has added us and gifted us. It's not about being professional or being marked by professionalism. It's about the manifestation of the Spirit in your life, and you expressing that not out of fear but out of freedom. When you look on every person that is a member or part of the body here, you see yourself as part of the whole, and how may I assist to edify one another in love? That's how the church is meant to function. And may God give us the view of the nature of the church and its function that should flow naturally out of that as we view the church as a body. And thank God, it's the body of Christ. Let us pray.