

1 COR 12.12-13: THE SPIRIT CREATES COMMUNITY

[Chelmsford 23/06/13]

1. CHURCH IS ABOUT COMMUNITY

A kindergarten teacher gave her class a 'show and tell' assignment of bringing something to represent their religion.

1. The first child stood in front of the class and said, "My name is Benjamin and I am Jewish and this is the Star of David."
2. The second child stood in front of the class and said, "My name is Mary. I'm a Catholic and this is the Crucifix."
3. The third child to stand in the front of the class said: 'My name is Billie. I'm a Baptist and this is the casserole'

Got the joke? For Baptists church is about eating together – hence the reference to a casserole. Certainly in this church we are forever eating together.

At the drop of a hat we will eat cake together after the morning service

We have Charis lunches and Outlook teas.

Today is another Hospitality Sunday – when many of us will be eating together.

Of course there is more to community than eating together.

Eating together is just an expression of the way in which we share our life together.

Church is about fellowship – it is about one anotherness – it is about community.

If you are new to our church, have you spotted our strap-line?

We say, '*Central Baptist church - a place to belong*'.

What's more, it is a place for everyone to belong.

In a world where many people outside the church are lonely and long for friendship, Central Baptist Church is a place where people can belong – where people can be loved – where people can feel valued and supported.

All this comes to mind when I read the words of Paul in 1 Cor 12.27 where Paul says: "**You are Christ's body and each one is a part of it**"

Yes, church is about belonging to a body or group of people. It is about community.

2. CHURCH IS ABOUT A DIVERSE COMMUNITY

The church is not just about community. It is also about diversity

The church by definition is made up of all sorts of people.

Listen to Paul again as he writes in 1 Cor 12.12,13: **Christ is like a single body, which has many parts; it is still one body, even though it is made up of different parts. In the same way, all of us, whether Jews or Gentiles, whether slaves or free, have been baptized into the one body by the same Spirit...**"

The church at Corinth was a pretty mixed-up bunch.

- There were **Jews** and **Gentiles**. Gosh, just think of the difference that would have involved. Jews and Gentiles then had as much to do with one another then as Jews and Arabs do today. A God-fearing Jew just would not dream of sitting down and having a meal with a non-Jew. Indeed, that was one of the key issues which the early church had to overcome.
- There were **slaves** and **free** people. Again, just think of the difference that would have involved. This was not just a class or life-style distinction, this was a distinction between those who had rights and those who had not rights at all.

Yet, says Paul, “**all of us.... have been baptized into the one body by the one Spirit**”.

Paul then goes on to labour this point of diversity, by drawing upon the analogy of the human body: “**The body itself is not made up of only one part, but of many parts**” (1 Cor 12.14). Just as in your body and mine we have all kinds of body parts, such as eyes and ears, hands and feet, all with different kinds of functions, so too within the church.

Diversity is part of the essence of the church.

The church is only the church in so far as variety is present.

Paul’s reference to Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, makes it clear that in the first place he has in mind not variety brought about by difference of gifting and personality, but rather variety brought about by culture and social standing.

The church of God by definition is a heterogeneous body.

True, we all need to share one common confession of faith – as Paul makes clear in 1 Cor 12.2 we all need to be able to declare that ‘**Jesus is Lord**’. But thereafter, the more differences the better.

When I first began as a minister, American church consultants were saying that if you wanted to see your church grow, then you needed to create a homogenous church – i.e. a church made up of the same kind of people. They argued, ‘*people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers*’ (McGavran).

And in one sense that is true: ‘birds of a feather do flock together’.

BUT that is not church. That is a club.

Here in Chelmsford, for instance, I believe that churches made up just of white people, or indeed churches made up of just black people, are a denial of the Gospel – churches need to reflect the community in which they are set, and the community in which we are set is mixed culturally. Similarly churches in Chelmsford which are just made up of young families, or young professionals are a denial of the Gospel – for those churches fail to reflect the community in which they are set.

The glory of the church is that it is diverse – the wonder of the Gospel is that the church is made up of people of different cultures and lifestyles. Listen to Paul writing to the churches of Galatia: “**There is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus**” (Gal 3.28).

Whoever we are, whatever we do, in Jesus we are family.

Or to use the imagery of 1 Corinthians: “**There are many parts, but one body**” (1 Cor 12.20).

I am excited by the diversity we experience here within our own church.
We are a church made up of young and old; of families and of singles.
We are a church made up of people of all kinds of social backgrounds
We are a church too made up of people of all kinds of cultural backgrounds.

It is exciting – but it is also challenging.
For the fact is that difference is not always easy to handle
It is easy to misunderstand one another. It is easy too to ignore one another.

I believe that as a church we need to reach out to one another more.
It is not enough to be fellow-worshippers – we need to know one another – we need to become friends of one another – indeed, we need to be there for one another.

3. CHURCH IS ABOUT A CARING COMMUNITY

Church is about being a community which has a duty of care for one another.
Listen again to the Apostle Paul: “**God himself has put the body together in such a way, so that...all its different parts have the same care for one another. If one part of the body suffers, all parts suffer with it; if one part is praised, all the other parts share its happiness**” (1 Cor 12.25-26).

Whenever I welcome people into church membership, I say: “*In a Baptist church membership involves entering into a dynamic covenant relationship with one another – a relationship in which we commit ourselves not only to work together to extend Christ’s Kingdom, but also to love one another and stand by one another whatever the cost*”.

That is precisely what Paul says here. If we are to live up to our calling to be the church, we need to care for one another.

And the reality is that all of us at some stage or another need care. According to Howard Snyder, an American Methodist: “*Our churches are filled with people who outwardly look contented and at peace, but inwardly are crying out for someone to love them... just as they are - confused, frustrated, often frightened, guilty, and often unable to communicate even within their own families. But the other people in the church look so happy and contented that one seldom has the courage to admit his own deep needs before such a self-sufficient group as the average church meeting appears to be*”.

How are we to care? I want to suggest four ways based on 1 Cor 12.25-26-

1. Be concerned for others

I find it significant that the word translated ‘care’ here in 1 Cor 12 is often used in the NT with negative connotations: e.g.,

- 1 Cor 7.32: "**I want you to be free from anxieties**"
- Phil 4.6: "**Do not worry** (lit: be anxious) **about anything**"
- Matt 6.34: "**Do not worry about tomorrow**"

But while we are not to be anxious for ourselves, we are to be anxious - on behalf of others!!

We are to be concerned for the interests of others.

When we greet one another on a Sunday, we are to ask after one another.

And when things are not right, to ensure that we give appropriate support to one another.

2. *Affirm those who feel "weaker"*

Paul's concern for caring for one another, related especially to honouring those in the body who "**seem to be weaker**" (1 Cor 12.22). Paul was concerned for those who felt they did not count – who felt that they were of less value than others.

He stresses that we all need one another – nobody is more important than another

I would like to think that in a church such as ours everybody has a place.

And yet the reality is that it is possible to overlook people in our church.

- Just as I was preparing this sermon, I had a phone call from one of our older members concerned about another older member – the truth is that it is easy in a church full of younger people for the old to feel neglected
- But what about single people? Or our couples without children? Does our monthly all-age service have the effect of marginalizing those who are not in families?
- We like to think of ourselves as a multi-cultural church: but the reality is that we are a white majority church, and it is not always easy being a minority in such a church.

Paul here in 1 Cor 12 seems to suggest that there is a place for positive discrimination in the church for those who '**seem to be weaker**'.

Goodness, what would positive discrimination look like in our church?

3. *Sympathize with those in trouble*

"If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer together with it"

It has been said that "*Nothing in human experience touches us more acutely with a sense of compassion (i.e. suffering-with) than the sight of a neighbour or friend in deep distress*". This compassion - this suffering with - is the true meaning of sympathy.

Sympathy is a feeling with and for the other.

Certainly, when one part of my body suffers, then all the rest of me suffers too. If someone steps on my toe, it's not just my toe that hurts, but the whole of me hurts. If I am trying to put up a hook and hit my finger by accident, I am just as likely to say that "*I hurt myself*" as "*I hurt my finger*".

What is true of the human body, should be true of the church, the body of Christ.

The body of Christ has a common nerve, whereby if one suffers, then all do too.

Peterson, *The Message* paraphrases : "***If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt, and in the healing***". A reminder that sharing in the hurt, is often part of the process of healing.

And yet the truth is that in our church we are not always good at being there for one another when life is tough. Let me be blunt: if we are not family people do not, for instance, always turn out for a funeral when there has been a death. And yet the truth is that we are family – we are all part of the body of Christ.

4. Share in the joy of others

"If one part is praised, all the other parts share in its happiness"

Peterson: "***If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance***"

Strange as it may seem, sharing in somebody else's joy is not always easy - particularly if they are blessed in a way in which we have not been blessed. All too often we become jealous, envious, even resentful of the blessing of others.

"It requires the grace of true humility to be genuinely glad when another is being blessed, used and praised" (David Prior)

Perhaps the key to sharing in the joy of others is a deeper understanding of the body metaphor. In so far as they too are members of the body, their joy is our joy.

Expressing it in terms of the human body, when my back is being massaged, I actually feel good all over - or when I have had a good meal, it is not just my stomach which feels comfortable, but all of me!

4. LET'S BE PART OF THIS COMMUNITY

"All of us, whether Jews or Gentiles, whether slaves of free, have been baptized into the one body by the Spirit" (1 Cor 12.13)

Let me encourage you all to ensure that you really are part of our community.

If you can truly say "**Jesus is Lord**" and are seeking to follow him, then we would love you to commit yourself to Central Baptist Church

If you have not been baptized, then let me encourage you to take that step: for in the NT baptism is God's way to become part of the body: "**all of us have been baptized into the one body by the Spirit**"

Maybe you have been baptized, but have yet to formalise your commitment to the body by becoming a member of Central Baptist Church: if so, then let me encourage you to take that second step, and publicly commit yourself to serve the Lord in and through this church.

Whoever you are, we want you to be part of our community.