

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

September 7, 2025

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Church - a Work in Progress

(Studies in 1 Corinthians)

The Shape of God's Body

(1 Corinthians 12:12-31)

Study #16

Introduction: In a manner of speaking...

When we hear, *"He's got a heart of gold."* *"She's a night owl."* *"You're a ray of sunshine."* *"I'm a couch potato."* - we're hearing figures of speech. And figures of speech are great aids to communication.

Well-placed analogies, similes, and metaphors will clear up what is unclear. They can add punch to our stories.

We hear God's revelation to us, His communication to us, in the Bible. So, we aren't surprised that the all-important message of the Bible is filled with figures of speech.

We read, *"The Lord is my Shepherd"* (Psalm 23) and *"Your Word is a lamp to my feet"* (Psalm 119:105) and *"The tongue is a fire."* (James 3:6)

Reading these brings images to the screens of our minds by which we can "see" God's care for us, the power of the Bible, and the power - for good or ill - of how we speak to each other.

When the Apostle Paul wanted to explain what the church of Jesus was all about to Christians in the city of Corinth, he went searching for a fit metaphor.

Early on in this letter (chapter 2), he referred to the church as God's field. The church is like a field in which God sows spiritual seed and produces a crop of growing disciples.

Then he wrote that the church was like a building. Paul had laid the building's foundation with the Good News that we find L-I-F-E in a trusting relationship with Jesus.

Paul further developed that image by saying that the church was a special kind of building - a temple. God lives in the church.

But the figure of speech that Paul finally latched onto in this letter and then repeated it in almost all of his other letters, is that of the church as a *BODY*. It was a Spirit-inspired, genius metaphor.

Lots of us here today don't have enough experience with life on the farm to get all the implications of the church as God's field. And the metaphor of the church as a building loses some of its punch to those of us who don't build buildings for a living.

But everybody's got a body. We're all experts on our own body. And it is the image of the church as a *body* that Paul develops today.

The Church: A Diverse Unity (vv. 12-13)

Christ Works in the World as a Human Body Works (12:12)

[12] For just as the body is one and yet has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ.

Let's remember that when the Corinthians first heard someone read those words out loud in a worship service, they wouldn't have automatically thought about the church as *"the body of Christ"* as we do today.

The image is ingrained in our thinking, but it wasn't in theirs. When they heard *"body"* they would have thought *"head and shoulders, knees and toes"* body.

But the human body is a great metaphor for the church.

That's because just as the church of Jesus is made up of uniquely designed and gifted people, the church is also a collection of integrally related people, united in Jesus.

In writing about the human body, Paul was writing about the church. But notice that he doesn't end the verse by saying, "*so also is the church.*" He ends by saying, "*so also is Christ.*"

That ending highlights the significance of the church. Jesus' church - not the buildings on Guilbeau or Tezel or Bandera Road - but the people who believe in Jesus IS Christ's presence in the world today.

Paul says that if someone wants to see Jesus today, we point them either to the Bible to read an account of Jesus' life OR we point them to His people, the church. The church is the shape of God's *body*.

Jesus' *body* is made up of very diverse and integrally related parts. First, we think of the ties that unite us.

The Ties That Bind Us (12:13)

All Christians have been baptized by the one Holy Spirit (v. 13a)

[13a] For by one Spirit we were all baptized¹ into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free...

Most scholars believe that in the early church, water baptism was nearly universal. Just about every Christian was baptized in water.

But I don't think Paul is talking here about water baptism. He was talking about another baptism.

¹ There are a lot of verses that reference the baptism of the Holy Spirit, all of them, except here in 1 Cor. 12, occur in the Gospels and Acts and either quote John the Baptist as predicting that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16), recall John's words (Acts 11:16), or look forward to the event on the Day of Pentecost as the baptism by the Holy Spirit (Act 1:5).

He was describing a work performed in anyone who believes at the moment they believe. They are immersed (that is what it means to be "*baptized*") into life in Christ.²

Paul pictures life in Christ as an enormous body of water into which the Holy Spirit dunks every one of us who believe when we believe. This shared experience unites all Christians.

This Spirit baptism unites us at a more fundamental level than ethnicity (Jew or Greek) or demography or station in life (slave or free).

We could think of other commonalities that might unite us - sex, age, politics, talents and abilities.

None of these are as core to our unity as is our unity in Christ which was established by our Spirit baptism. We are each "*in Christ.*" Therefore, our unity is eternal and our every difference, by comparison, is trivial.

Note, too, that Paul used the word "*all.*"

Every Christian who was a part of the mess that was the church in Corinth had been baptized in Christ when they believed. No exceptions. No waiting period.

You believe, you are Spirit baptized, immersed in Christ with every other Christian.³

Then, Paul listed another experience shared by every believer.

All Christians have drunk of the one Holy Spirit (v. 13b)

[13b]...and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

² Secular uses of the Greek word "baptize" (*baptizw*) sometimes describe a ship that sinks and is "immersed" in the ocean.

³ As one author wrote, "*Since Paul said that all the Corinthian believers had been baptized by one Spirit, and given the level of immaturity of many of them, it follows that Spirit-baptism cannot be a second blessing or subsequent experience of God apart from conversion and the initial arrival of the Spirit into a person's life.*"

There is that “*all*” word again. Every Christian swims in the sphere of the Spirit AND every Christian has drunk of the Spirit. We are all *in* the Spirit and the Spirit is *in* all of us.

All the people who believe in Jesus make up a unified, diverse, and interdependent *body*, each one an essential part of that *body*.

That is the reality here today. We who believe in Jesus are a diverse, unified *body* of Jesus. But sadly, there were people in the church at Corinth who had a hard time accepting that idea.

Some didn’t believe that they were all that essential to the church *body*. So, Paul decided to focus on the human body for a bit for their benefit.

If the Church is to Function Right, It Needs Me (vv. 14-19)

I am Wrong to Think, “The church doesn’t need ME” (12:14-17)

The human body is made up of diverse parts (v. 14)

[14] For the body is not one part, but many.

Our bodies are wonders of God’s creative handiwork.

My younger grandchildren could name a few of their bodies’ parts. My teenaged grandchildren could name a whole lot more.

But physicians and scientists who study the body could list thousands - or tens of thousands - of body parts. They would include external and internal organs, microscopic particles, systems and sub-systems, all doing their job to keep us running right.

To make this point clear, Paul created an imaginary speech and put this speech into the mouth of the foot.

Hand over foot (v. 15)

[15] If the foot says, “Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,” it is not for this reason any less a part of the body.

Being the son of a podiatrist, I have a dog in this fight. I can testify that feet are very important. Feet put bread on the table when I was growing up.

But the foot in Paul’s speech was comparing itself to the hand.

And the foot saw that the hand got to wear all the jewelry. People shake hands when they meet - not feet. They don’t say “*Give me five!*” - and then hold out their feet. (Well, sometimes I do...)

The poor foot is depressed because it isn’t a hand. But the foot transports the body from place to place, kicks the soccer ball, slams on the brake pedal. The foot is essential.

So is the ear.

Eye over ear (v. 16)

[16] And if the ear says, “Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body,” it is not for this reason any less a part of the body.

This ear has an inferiority complex because it isn’t an eye. And as with the foot, we hear where the ear is coming from.

While ears get pierced, I’ve never read a love sonnet about the beauty of the ear. I’ve not ever seen ear make-up.

But ears hear the oncoming car, the beautiful song, the voices of the ones we love, the Word of God. No other body part can do any of that.

Every foot or ear out there that thinks its superfluous is wrong.

The part that believes it is superfluous is WRONG! (v. 17)

[17] If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

A diversity of parts is essential if the body is to function according to Manufacturer's design.⁴

We can all let our minds wander to things that wouldn't happen if one part or one inner organ or one body system was gone or didn't work right.

And still sticking with the physical, literal body, Paul says that there should never be a complaint about what function any part of the body plays because each part's function has been ordained by God.

God Has Sovereignly Placed ME Where He Wants Me (vv. 18-20)

[18] But now God has arranged the parts, each one of them in the body, just as He desired.

God designed the foot to touch the ground, the thumb to be opposed to the other fingers, kidneys to come in pairs, and the knee to go just so far and no farther.

He put the human body all together "*just as He desired.*"

And Paul pointed out, ***[19] And if they were all one part, where would the body be? [20] But now there are many parts, but one body.***

All of this about the human body sends a message to the members of a church that they are each essential to the proper working of the church. And we'll soon get to the point of considering that in just a minute.

Before we get there, though, let's let Paul continue with the second part of his extended metaphor.

Now he makes fun of some other body parts who fell off the fence on the other side and thought that they didn't need the rest of the body's members.

If the Church it to Function Right, It Needs YOU (vv. 20-26)

I am Wrong to Think, "The Church Doesn't Need YOU!" (12:21)

[21] And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you.

Here, the eye and the head are being arrogant. They think their lofty roles make them non-dependent of other members of the body.

But those arrogant eyes and heads couldn't be more wrong.

Seemingly Less Important Body Parts are Essential (vv. 22-24a)

[22] On the contrary, it is much truer that the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; [23] and those parts of the body which we consider less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor, and our less presentable parts⁵ become much more presentable, [24] whereas our more presentable parts have no need of it.

Some body parts aren't considered suitable for public display, so we cover them up with clothing. We don't do that for eyes or hands.

But the absence of appearances can be deceiving.

The parts we hide are essential. And other invisible, internal body parts - kidney, liver, heart - don't get the acclaim that the more obvious parts do. That doesn't mean that they are non-essential.

Paul didn't write that the "*weaker*" and "*less honorable*" parts of the human body are "*welcomed additions.*" No. They are "*necessary.*"

⁴ Note that the foot does not compare itself with the eye and the ear doesn't compare itself with the hand. We are prone to envy those who have similarities to us, rather than those who are patently in a different class.

⁵ Many think that Paul was referring here to internal and sexual organs.

The Point of God's Orchestration of the Body (12:24b-26)

[24b] But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that part which lacked, [25] so that there may be no division in the body, but that the parts may have the same care for one another. [26] And if one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts rejoice with it.

Again, that's Paul describing the human body. It is a marvel of cooperation, feedback loops, and creative adaptation.

We've all seen someone who has lost one of their senses grow in the use of their other senses. They compensate. Or someone with a serious injury to one hand will add strength and abilities to use the other hand in new ways.

Or take inflammation.

After a hard workout or strenuous exercise, you'll feel aches and pains the next day. That's inflammation working to heal damaged muscles. Blood rushes through dilated arteries to the overstressed muscles and tendons to begin healing.

If you injure yourself, there will be swelling or redness at the site of the injury. That's inflammation at work. Or if you get an infection, you'll run a fever. Again, inflammation.

Inflammation is the body going to bat for itself. One system coming to the aid of other damaged systems. The process of inflammation removes dead cells and repairs damaged tissue,

The body works, thanks to God. But when the body doesn't work, it's tragic and ugly. And that happens.⁶

There are certain diseases and physical problems that afflict people because the body actually fights against itself.

I have read that this is true for autoimmune diseases like rheumatoid arthritis (attacking joints), multiple sclerosis (attacking the nervous system), and (to some extent) Parkinson's disease (attacking brain cells).

This is inflammation run amuck. The immune system, which is designed to **protect** the body from unwanted pathogens, goes haywire and instead **attacks** the body's own healthy cells, tissues, or organs.

It's a terrible thing when the body attacks itself.

And here is where, late in the game, Paul turns a corner and stops considering the human body to apply the metaphor of the human body to the church.

Paul's metaphor is brilliant. It fits, because when the church works like a healthy body, it is a beautiful thing to behold. When it doesn't, it is as tragic as the most severe autoimmune disease you can imagine.

Now, this that follows, fundamentally, is what the church of Jesus is. This is who we are.

Summary: The Ultimate Statement of Unity and Diversity (v. 27)

[27] Now you are Christ's body, and individually parts of it."

A unified body

We, together, are one body. United.

⁶ The following is from Christian author, Philip Yancey: When we think of leprosy, we picture large, unsightly tumors covering a victim's body, disfigured faces and limbs. Sadly, these pictures of leprosy are accurate. Through pioneering research Dr. Paul, Brandt, a Christian physician, discovered that leprosy patients do not primarily lose their fingers and toes because the disease itself causes decay, but

because leprosy patients are not sensitized to pain. The cruelty of leprosy is that it robs the sufferer of the sensation of pain when water is too hot, or a hammer handle is splintered, or when a shoe rubs the foot the wrong way. Accidental self-abuse and self-mutilation destroys a leper's body.

Remember, we are united by shared realities and shared experiences.

- We all call God “*Father*,” which makes us family. We are brothers and sisters in Jesus. (12:1)
- We have all been gifted by the Spirit to serve the work of Jesus in the church and in the world. (12:4-6)
- We’re all swimming in the same pool - baptized into Christ; we’ve all drunk of the same drink: the Spirit. (12:13)

Add to this that we are all also united in our mission to love God (Great Commandment, and to love each other (New Commandment), and to make disciples. (Great Commission)

We are united by something more transcendent and lasting than a school’s sports team, a political party, national pride, or even family.

We are spiritually joined at the heart.

All of us here today who believe in Jesus are united in Jesus. And...we are as unique and different as can be.

A diversified body

When we don’t know a group of people, it is easy to view that group as a group.

“Look, there’s a flock of teens. There is a gaggle of senior citizens. Look, a confusion of parents.”

But once we get to know the people who make up a group, we can no longer view the group as a group.

We see individuals, each one of whom leads a life that would make a block buster movie. (Really. There are no boring people.)

Over the years, I have heard a lot of life and salvation stories. I’ve never heard the same story twice. We are each unique.

Each life is a story with great depth and texture and complexity. Every one of you here today broke the mold. There’s no one like you. God has never and will never made another one like you.

We are each unique creations of God. We here today are a *body* filled with people whose life stories are full of amazing grace and high drama, dazzling failures, and roaring successes.

In our church “*body*” there are upfront people and behind the scenes people. (And then there are some people like to stay behind those who serve behind the scenes.)

There are people who are exceptionally good at warmly welcoming people they don’t know. Others make coffee and set the A/C units. Some have the talent to set up tables for a women’s lunch...with good attitudes.

Some people are the ones you want with you when life hits hard. He or she is a comforting presence. And you’re grateful for the guy who will speak the truth in love when you’ve stumbled into sin. He loves you enough to wound you back to health.

There are “*body*” parts who lovingly teach God’s truth to two and three year olds, which is way different than doing that for adults or teens or elementary or pre-K’s.

Other parts of our “*body*” serve or give financially to serve Afghan refugees, lovingly help people learn English, contribute to the Food Pantry or to the Benevolence Fund.

Some people lead and organize stuff, some play instruments or sing, some do magic with tech. Others help missionaries, love on babies, pray fervently, befriend neighbors, shine as a bright light all week long at work or school, pour themselves into raising their own kids, and write letters / cards / emails / texts just to bring lift up someone who’s down.

Just over the course of the last week, I - who see less than 1% of all the stuff that happens - have seen people doing every one of these things.

I don't know anybody who could do all of that. But the varied parts of the *body* all working together get it all done.

We here simply need to guard against the autoimmune response of turning on each other. We need to beware the ugliness of inflammation run amuck, where parts of the *body* attack each other.

Instead, let's cheer each other on to do what is on each of our hearts to do for Jesus - whether inside the church structure or outside. Let's offer help where help is needed. No jealousy. No resentment. We're all in this together, participating in the great work of God.

This lived-out diverse unity will be a tremendous witness to a world that is racked by division. Lovingly pulling in the same direction will be a magnet to those who are lost.

If anybody in Corinth was going to know what Jesus was like, it was going to be by way of the people in that church demonstrating love to them and to each other.

And if people in Northwest San Antonio are going to know what Jesus is like, it will be through us and other *bodies* like us.⁷

As Paul turns toward home base, he affirms, yet again, God's love for unified diversity, which is clearly seen by the way He has put the church together.

The Glory and the Beauty of Diversity in the Church (vv. 28-31a)

[28] And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations,⁸ and various kinds of tongues.

⁷ God wants each of us to be able to say, "*I am uniquely gifted to carry out what Jesus wants me to do. My giftedness allows me to make a contribution that is indispensable and irreplaceable.*" (As the Yiddish proverb says, "*If I try to be like him, who will be like me?*")

⁸ Administrations - the activity of the man who steers a ship. In the church, this would be a leader.

[29] All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? [30] All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they?⁹ [31a] But earnestly desire the greater gifts.

You are each more gifted at certain things that need to be done in serving Jesus than others are. That's the way Jesus' *body* works.

When Paul ends this chapter with these words, ***[31b]....And yet, I am going to show you a far better way***, he is transitioning to a consideration of the excellencies of love, which Ryan Johnson will explore with you next Sunday.

But as we wrap up this morning, let's consider again the church - a unified diversity.

Conclusion:

Over the years, I have heard the church compared to many things, many of them helpful metaphors.

The church is like an Emergency Medical Center. It is open long hours, easy to get to, and filled with people who are willing to serve those who drop in with unexpected needs.

The church is like a team where we cheer each other on to victory and console each other in defeat.

The church is like a family where acceptance is not based on looks or intelligence, but on heredity.

⁹ The three kinds of gifted members listed first (apostles, prophets, and teachers) were probably rated lower in Corinth than those who had the more spectacular gift of tongues. They were considered by Paul to be primary because of their benefit to the whole church. The gift of tongues, on the other hand, suited the Corinthian penchant for self-expression and the pursuit of personal freedom and is listed last.

But there is no image of the church as enduring or as endearing as the human body. The body holds together in perfect balance the polar forces of unity and diversity. The church comprises people of all shapes and sizes who nevertheless are made one in Jesus.

What is the shape of God's body? It's us. The church.

God no longer reveals His shape in the form of a pillar of cloud and fire, or in a temple where sacrifices are offered.

The world will see God's shape in the collection of believers that make up every church - or they won't see it.