

Is the Cause of Christ a “Team Sport”?

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

It’s April. And we all know what that means: We’re at the height of “March Madness.” So here’s a question from the world of basketball. What would you think about a basketball player who said to his/her coach, “You know, Coach, I’m not really into this whole ‘team thing’ . . . To be honest, I really don’t care if the team wins a single game. I just want to be a great player. I want to perfect my game and be the best who’s ever played my position.”

We’d say that there’s something fundamentally wrong with that mentality. Basketball is a team sport. A golfer might be able to get away with that attitude, but not a basketball player. If you’re on a team, you *have* to be a team player.

Here’s the next question. What would you think about a follower of Christ who said to God the Father, “You know, God, I’m not really into this whole body of Christ thing. To be honest, I really don’t really care whether the local church sinks or swims. I just want to be the best Christian I can possibly be. I want to walk as close to You as I possibly can. I want to experience Your power and do amazing things for the kingdom.”

You can’t really evaluate that mindset unless you’re clear on whether or not the cause of Christ is a “team sport.” If it’s not, then that mindset is fine: be the best you can be independent of anybody else. But if the cause of Christ is in reality/fact by God’s design a “team sport,” then that mentality is as destructive as a basketball player who could care less about his team.

Today we look at a passage of Scripture that screams out, “The cause of Christ is a team effort!” Please turn with me to 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. This passage discusses the spiritual reality that Jesus Christ is committed to working through the body of Christ (not merely individual believers). The imagery of the “body of Christ” exposes how flawed and destructive an individualistic mindset really is.

All believers are united by the same Spirit into the one (and only) body of Christ. (12:12-13)
Paul gives the basic image in verse 12:

12 For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ.

We might have expected Paul to end the verse by saying, “so also is *the church*”: just as a body has many members, so also the church, the body of Christ, has many members. But Paul says, “so also is Christ”: Christ has many members. Do you see what Paul is doing here? He is making an indissoluble link between Christ and the church.

Paul learned of this identification between Christ and the church on the road to Damascus when he first encountered Christ. Before Paul was a believer, he was on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians there. He was blinded by a light, fell to the ground, and heard the voice of Jesus saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *Me*?” (Acts 9:4) Jesus didn’t say, “Why are you persecuting My people?” He said, “Why are you persecuting Me?” To persecute

the church was to persecute Jesus Himself. Here in 1 Corinthians 12:12 when Paul wants to say that the church (the body of Christ) has many members, he says that Christ has many members. Jesus is that closely identified with the church. The imagery suggests that just as Christ accomplished His will through His human body when He lived among us, He now accomplishes His will through us, the body of Christ. We are the tangible expression of Christ in this world – not merely as individuals, but corporately.

In verse 13 Paul reiterates that there is one – and only one – body of Christ because there is only one Spirit.

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

Paul is here describing a complex of events that take place when a person comes to faith in Christ. At the end of the verse Paul mentions that “we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” This reflects Jesus’ promise (John 7:37-39) that all who are thirsty can come to Him and drink; those who believe will find “rivers of living water . . . flow[ing] from their innermost being.” Jesus was speaking of the satisfying, nourishing presence of the Holy Spirit in all who believe.

In the first part of the verse Paul writes that when we receive the Holy Spirit we are “baptized into one body” (the body of Christ). Just as John the Baptist baptized with water, Jesus baptizes every believer with the Spirit. Those who are baptized with the Spirit are placed into one body. Since there is *one Spirit*, it only makes sense that all who are baptized with this Spirit are part of *one body*. Paul mentions “Jews or Greeks” and “slaves or free” to emphasize that people who in other contexts might have nothing to do with each other find themselves united in the body of Christ. *All believers are united by the same Spirit into the same body of Christ.*

If you belong to Jesus Christ, you belong to something much bigger than yourself. Whether you realize it or not, you are now part of the body of Christ and your well-being is tied up with the well-being of the whole.

This truth has at least two implications which are easy to understand but hard to live out.

Implication #1: Those who feel inferior should see their worth in the body of Christ. (12:14-19) In verses 14 through 19 Paul addresses the mindset of those believers who tend to think that they were inferior to others and therefore unimportant. To press the “team” analogy, these are the players on the practice squad. They think, “I rarely get in the game, so I’m not very important to this team.” Paul first puts words in the mouth of a foot to make his point:

14 For the body is not one member, but many. 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 the less a part of the body.

A foot has no reason to feel inferior to a hand; the foot is just as much a part of the body as the hand. Paul next puts words in the mouth of an ear to make the same point:

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 the less a part of the body.

Paul next points out that a healthy body/church **requires** a diversity of members that perform very different functions. It doesn't just tolerate diversity; it demands it.

17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. 19 If they were all one member, where would the body be?

The answer is, "There wouldn't be a body. There would only be a pile of eyes or ears or hands. You wouldn't have a body." As one author put it, you would have organs but you wouldn't have an organism (Blomberg, p. 246). Paul is challenging us to think about ourselves in relation to the whole body of Christ instead of merely thinking about ourselves in isolation.

For the person who tends to feel inferior to others because of his/her role/gifts in the body of Christ, this is a matter of submission to God (v. 18): "But now **God** has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as **He** desired." For the good of the entire body, the ear needs to accept that it is not an eye. For the good of the entire body, each one of us needs to accept the role that God has given.

Some people understand their role quite clearly and others don't. One of the things we offer to help people discern their primary role in the body of Christ is a course called "Network." It's a six-week course that we offer periodically on Sunday mornings. In that course you receive teaching about spiritual gifts, ministry passions, and styles of ministry. You evaluate yourself and have those that know you well give you some feedback. At the end of the course you do a consultation with Brian to help you think through and clarify the teaching you've received and the insights you've gained. Many have found this course to be very helpful in discerning their gifting and role in the body of Christ.

This imagery of each of us being members of the body of Christ shouldn't be pressed so far that we each think we only have a narrow set of things we do and a narrow role we play. For example, even though some are given the gift of mercy, all of us are called to be merciful. Even though some are given the gift of giving as a primary ministry in the body of Christ, all of us are called to give. Even though only some are given the gift of encouragement, all of us are called to "encourage each other."

In practical terms, in the local church we all serve more broadly than our gifting as a basic commitment to serving one another. That's the way "families" work. If I said to Brenda, "Honey, I'm not really gifted in mowing the grass or setting the table or putting away the dishes . . ." there might be trouble. We do some things because they need to be done and we're able to do them. In other words, we should serve more broadly than our specific gifting. You may help out in the nursery or in a children's Sunday school class because you understand the need and because you're able to help.

But when it comes to your primary role in the body of Christ, there is no reason whatsoever to feel inferior to anybody else in the church. If God has designed you to be a behind-the-scenes

person, serve behind the scenes with great joy and passion. You are absolutely essential to the cause of Christ. If you have the gift of administration – the ability to organize and structure things so that ministries function well – you need to know that your role is critical to the mission of the church. This is true whether we’re talking about the Alpha ministry or youth ministry or women’s Bible studies. Without people gifted in administration, there’s great frustration and stress; ultimately the cause of Christ suffers. ***Whatever your role, you should see your worth in the cause of Christ.***

Implication #2: Those who feel superior should see the worth of those who seem unnecessary. (12:20-26) In these verses Paul addresses those who tend to think they’re superior to others. His challenge involves realizing that people who seem to be expendable really aren’t. To press the “team” analogy, this is the person who says, “Your job is to throw me the ball.” Again, Paul uses the imagery of the human body to make his point.

20 But now there are many members, but one body. 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." 22 On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; 23 and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, 24 whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. . .

Some parts of the human body are weaker than others (the little finger isn’t as strong as the thumb), but that doesn’t make it unnecessary. We view some parts of the body as “less honorable” than other parts (the intestines, for example), but that doesn’t make them unnecessary. Some parts of the body are “less presentable” than other parts of the body (that’s why we wear clothes), but that doesn’t make those parts unnecessary. The implications for the body of Christ are obvious:

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

We are all prone to grumble about others in the body of Christ; we naturally notice things about others that makes think that they are unnecessary – that we’d probably be better off without them. Paul says that we need to take it up with God: “**God** has so composed the body . . .” Just like you wouldn’t “write off” your hand because it’s not living up to your standards, you shouldn’t write off another believer because s/he is weak or suffering or lacking or simply different than you. No, as in the human body, we need each member.

Paul is challenging those who feel superior to others to “have the same care” for people that they deem unnecessary (just as you would seek treatment for a gall bladder that became inflamed). Those who are doing well should take time to suffer with those who suffer (just as you would stop everything if your finger got smashed in the car door). Those who are struggling should “rejoice” (i.e., find joy) when others are honored. This is very much a team (vs. individualistic)

mindset. Because we're part of the same body, we should see the worth of others who seem to be unnecessary.

Let's get real with this. We deem others unnecessary in the body of Christ for a variety of reasons: they're not like us in terms of interests, in terms of life stage, in terms of temperament. Sometimes people do things to push others away; we're all very flawed and difficult at times. That doesn't change the fact that God has designed the body of Christ so that there are no unnecessary members. Can you think of someone in the church (Faith EFC) that seems unnecessary to you and/or to others? Can you think of someone that you or others tend to write off?

My encouragement to you in relation to those persons is to look for opportunities to encourage and include. Instead of merely tolerating such people, look for opportunities to build them up and communicate their value. This is consistent with Jesus' comments about doing good works toward "the least of these my brothers" in Matthew 25; when we befriend and encourage and address needs of brothers and sisters that many deem expendable, we do it to Christ.

It is said that Francis of Assisi found the sight and smell of lepers repulsive. He would normally notice them and avoid them whenever possible. One day, however, he was moved to compassion. He got off of his horse, gave some money to the leper, hugged him, and even gave him a "holy kiss." Francis climbed back upon his horse, turned around, and the man was gone. He concluded that he had just "encountered Christ Himself in leprous disguise." (Leadership Journal, Fall 2007, p. 31).

That's a good picture of how we should approach those that others view as expendable. Remember that Jesus is so closely identified with His people that Paul could say that we are all members of Christ. When we encourage and include "the least of these" we are ministering to Christ. Jesus pointed out in the SoM that everybody is kind to their friends. But it's a true mark of being His disciples when we are kind to others to whom we might not naturally be drawn.

Your kindness to someone else might just be the thing that allows that person to see his/her worth in the body of Christ. When that happens, the cause of Christ is advanced.

Note: These verses were not covered in the message on Sunday:

Conclusion (12:27-31) Notice in verse 27 that Paul refers to the Corinthian church as “Christ’s body.” For this reason we can speak of an individual church as the body of Christ as well as the Church universal (all Christians everywhere) as the body of Christ.

27 Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues.

[By enumerating these gifts by “first . . . second . . . third . . .” Paul isn’t talking about the relative value of these gifts; that understanding would violate everything he’s just said. Paul is probably here talking about “chronological priority” (Blomberg’s term, p. 247): when God established a church, He appointed first apostles (those “sent” to take the gospel to other people and cultures), second prophets (those who have a message from God), third teachers (those who can explain the Scriptures), then other types of gifts that are necessary for the ongoing health of the church. Paul mentions “various kinds of tongues” last – probably not because it was the least valuable gift but because some were elevating it to a place of superiority.]

In verses 29 and 30 Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions to emphasize once again that not everybody has the same spiritual gift(s).

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?

No, of course, all do not have the same gift just as all members of the human body do not have the same function. [Brian will pick up verse 31 next week as an introduction to chapter 13.]

As I said earlier, what we’re talking about today is easy to understand but hard to live out. But without this mindset we’re might as well be playing a team sport as individuals. The goal, of course, isn’t merely to “get along”; the goal is to represent Jesus Christ faithfully in this world. We not only do that individually; we do that corporately as the body of Christ.