

IT'S ABOUT PEOPLE: THE PRIORITY OF RELATIONSHIPS
SELECTED SCRIPTURES

Someone called this maze of relationships, “the theory of relativity:”

...consider the marriage mayhem created when 76-year-old Bill Baker of London recently wed Edna Harvey. She happened to be his granddaughter’s husband’s mother. That’s where the confusion began, according to Baker’s granddaughter, Lynn.

“My mother-in-law is now my step-grandmother. My grandfather is now my stepfather-in-law. My mom is my sister-in-law and my brother is my nephew. But even crazier is that I’m now married to my uncle and my own children are my cousins.”

From this experience, Lynn should gain profound insight into the theory of relativity. [*Campus Life*, March, 1981, p. 31; accessed at <https://bible.org/illustration/theory-relativity>.]

Relationships are confusing. And difficult. And it is often tempting to just give up on some relationships: “it’s just too hard...” But we *need* relationships. God has designed people for relationships. And even more importantly, God has designed the church to be a model for what relationships should be. It’s easy to leave a church and our relationships there. But it shouldn’t be easy.

This week, we are starting a four-part series that we will do on communion Sundays during the summer: “Forgotten Attributes of Ministry.” We have a list of core values that guide what we do, but sometimes we forget some of those essentials. And our goal this summer and fall is to create a greater atmosphere of fellowship and godly unity in our church body. And we’re going to do that by focusing on and remembering some of the things that are easy to forget.

And this morning we are going to do a survey of a variety of passages and then end up in 1 Corinthians 12, thinking about the priority of relationships: it’s about people. Ministry is about people. It’s easy to think about tasks and roles and responsibilities, but behind all those tasks are relationships and the simple, shepherding care of God’s people.

THE CHURCH — THIS CHURCH — IS DESIGNED BY GOD TO CARE FOR GOD’S PEOPLE.

1. The New Testament Emphasis on Relationships in the Church

- ✓ We are BROTHERS
- ✓ We are a FAMILY
- ✓ We are with ONE ANOTHER

2. The Church Body is ONE: the Hope of What *Is* and Should Be (1 Cor. 12:12)

3. The Church Body is DIVERSE: Complications to Our Relationships (1 Cor. 12:12b-17)

4. The Church Body in HARMONY: God's Provision for Our Diversity (1 Cor. 12:18-26)

- ✓ God has PURPOSELY made us diverse (vv. 18-20) [He made our relationships just as He wants them]
- ✓ God has made us diverse to protect our UNITY (vv. 21-26)
- ✓ God has made us diverse to extend our TESTIMONY (v. 27; Eph. 2:11-22)

1. The New Testament Emphasis on Relationships in the Church

- We are BROTHERS
 - ✓ Because of our relationship as adopted sons to God the Father, we are all brothers with one another. We are kin. And just like we can't change our blood relations, we can't change our blood of Christ relations either. The NT uses the term "brother" or "brethren" to refer to that relationship 180x in the Epistles. Over and over the NT writers are reminding the readers that the relational dynamic between each other is essential just as our relationship with Christ is essential (e.g., 1 Thess. 4:1, 10; 2 Thess. 3:13, 15; 1 Jn. 2:10ff; 3:14-17).
 - ✓ There are also repeated reminders that these relationships should be loving — we are "beloved brothers" (e.g., Philemon 16; 1 Cor. 15:58; Phil. 4:1; Col. 4:7, 9). (This may also be a subtle reminder that it is not always easy to love one another but because of our brotherhood, we should be known for our love for each other.)
 - ✓ And we have these relationships because of our common "big brother," Jesus Christ: Rom. 8:29; Heb. 2:11, 17. He is the Son of God and because we are adopted by God, He is also our brother (of course, He has a priority and position far greater than us). We care for one another as brothers the way our brother, Christ, cares for us.
- We are a FAMILY
 - ✓ There are other kinds of "family" metaphors used by the NT to indicate the closeness of our fellowship with one another.
 - ✓ We are the bride of Christ (one united bride to Him). Cf. Rev 18:23; 19:7; 21:2, 9.
 - ✓ We are part of God's household (1 Tim. 3:15). This is more than just a "house;" it indicates the functioning of an entire family unit and all those who support the unit. It's *one* household.
 - ✓ In this house and family, there are fathers (1 Tim. 5:1; 1 Jn. 2:13-14) and mothers (1 Tim. 5:2) and brothers (1 Tim. 5:1) and sisters (1 Tim. 5:2) and we should treat one another accordingly.
 - ✓ We are all sons of God, as implied by the term "brothers" (Rom. 8:14; **Gal. 3:26**).
- We are with ONE ANOTHER
 - ✓ There are at least 58 uses of the term "one another" in the Epistles; these uses indicate how we are to care for one another: minister to one another, serve one another, love one another, honor one another, accept one another, build up one another, do not judge one another, submit to one another, do not lie to one another, do not be jealous of one another, encourage one another.
 - ✓ The NT also uses the word "fellow" to indicate how we are linked to one another: we are

fellow heirs, fellow prisoners, fellow members, fellow partakers of the gospel, fellow partakers in tribulation, fellow workers, fellow citizens, fellow soldiers, and fellow slaves. And of all these, four are used most often:

- We are fellow heirs of Christ (Rom 8:17; Eph 3:6; Heb 11:9; 1 Pet 3:7). All that we have we have as a gift from God and we all have the same inheritance (no one has a better or worse inheritance in their salvation). This precludes pride.
- But far more than that are the phrases that we are fellow prisoners, slaves, and workers (20x – Col. 4:7, 10, 11-12; Philemon 1, 23-24; Rom. 16:3, 7, 9, 21). While we have an inheritance of God we are all servants and slaves of Him and again, there is no preeminence among slaves. We all work with joy for what the Master has given us, without looking down on others.

- ✓ We are connected to each other and those connections have implications (which we will see in more detail in 1 Cor. 12). We are not meant to be alone in the body of Christ. And others should not be alone either. And we should always be grateful for the relationships God has given us.

“While our individual walks are crucial, we are impoverished in our pursuit of God if we do not avail ourselves of the help that is available through mutually edifying relationships in our covenant church family. (Eph. 4:15-17; Heb. 10:24-25)....

“We can’t live the Christian life alone. We are saved individually from our sins, yet we are not saved into a vacuum. We’re saved into a mutually edifying community of believers who are building each other up and spurring each other on to love and good deeds.” [Dever & Alexander]

2. The Church Body is ONE: the Hope of What *Is* and Should Be (1 Cor. 12:12a)

- Another analogy Scripture uses for our relationships is that we are the body of Christ (He is the Head)
 - ✓ Cf. Rom. 12:4; Eph. 2:16; 4:4, 12ff; Col. 1:18; 2:19; 3:15.
 - ✓ But this favorite term of Paul is used most in 1 Corinthians 12 — total of 18x.
 - ✓ We are familiar with this term, but it is a brand new concept in the NT; the emphasis is that Christ is the head and authoritative over all in His body (cf. **Eph. 1:22-23**; Col. 1:18ff).
 - ✓ The inference is that if we are the body under His headship, then He will care for us, which is the very point Paul makes in Eph. 5:28-29.
- When Paul introduces the concept of the body in 1 Cor. 12, his first point is that it is *one* (v. 12 [2x], 13, 20). And he also uses the term, ***the body***, to indicate that there is only one body underneath the headship of Christ (vv. 18, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27).

- ✓ Whatever else we say about the body in the verses to follow, we recognize that there is a unity and singularity to this body. There are not other bodies of Christ, but just this one. No matter how diverse the different parts of the body are they comprise only one body of Christ.
- ✓ And notice also that we don't decide who is in the body or how the body comes to be: the body is put together (v. 13) ***by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...all made to drink of one Spirit.***
 - So the Spirit is the One who identifies us all with one common identity in Christ.
 - And just as the Spirit is One, and not divided, so the body/church that He makes is one and undivided.
 - This is not something that we hope to become, but it is what we are already (**Eph. 4:4-6; Jn. 17:20-22**). We are no more divided as a body than God is divided. That is the *reality*.
- And at the same time, we also are to work to protect the unity of the body — that is, we should act out the reality of what we are (**Eph. 4:4, 12-13; Jn. 17:23**).
- One implication of this: it is no small matter if we are in disharmony and unresolved conflict with one another. When I candidated as pastor for GBC, the second question asked in an open forum was, “how do you handle conflict?” I can't remember what I said then, but I know what I'd like to say now: “I RUN FROM IT!” Who likes conflict and disharmony? No one. Yet since we are one that means that we will run *towards* conflict to resolve it as soon as we can (Mt. 5:23ff).

3. The Church Body is DIVERSE: Complications to Our Relationships (1 Cor. 12:12b-17)

- Now if we are one body, one might assume that God will make everyone in that body the same just to make sure that unity and harmony is maintained. But he doesn't. Look at all the different ways that our diversity is revealed in this passage:
 - ✓ ***many members*** (vv. 12, 14, 20) — this is used on contrast to ***one***.
 - ✓ ***Jews or Greeks*** (v. 13) — these are not just different kinds of people; they are different races and they *hate* each other (parable of the good Samaritan exemplifies the hatred). Cf. Eph. 2:11 – 3:13.
 - ✓ ***slaves or free*** (v. 13) — differing socio-economic classes and they had the same temptation to discriminate then that we do today (Js. 2).
 - ✓ ***foot...hand...*** (vv. 15-17) — differing ministry responsibilities/roles
 - ✓ ***weaker...less honorable...more abundant honor...*** (vv. 22-23) — there are some responsibilities in the body which are more prominent and noticeable
 - ✓ The lists of gifts (vv. 8-11, 28-30) both indicate differing gifts within the body.

- ✓ All these things emphasize that we are *different*. And to that we can also add male/female and age and cultural backgrounds and political preferences.
 - ✓ What we must notice is that Paul isn't trying to hide the differences and diversity; he is highlighting it and saying it is a reality within the body of Christ and it is ultimately good.
 - ✓ We don't have to make ourselves diverse; God has already done that!
- But before we can see how it is good (the final point in the message), we have to acknowledge that the diversity is a temptation to become divisive and disharmonious.
 - ✓ The temptation in the church is to keep everybody in their own groups:

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| ➤ Young marrieds | ➤ Men | ➤ Neighborhoods |
| ➤ Middle age with children | ➤ Women | ➤ White collar professionals |
| ➤ Middle age without children | ➤ Singles | ➤ Various ethnicities |
| ➤ Older adults | ➤ Teenagers | |

- ✓ Yet the NT does no such thing — it recognizes that we are different and the implication is that we need to affirm, encourage, and minister within those differences.
- ✓ E.g., it's appropriate for mothers of preschoolers to get together to talk about common problems, but not to the exclusion of cultivating other relationships (ministering to teens or visiting elderly shut-ins...).

“There are relationships of similarity in the church — and we should be thankful for them. Relationships of similarity offer a level of understanding that is important and unique. But then — and this is key — there should also be relationships where you're only friends because you're Christians, without any worldly explanation.” [The Compelling Community, 79.]

- The diversity we have in the body complicates and makes our relationships difficult; but God does that for a particular purpose...

4. The Church Body in HARMONY: God's Provision for Our Diversity (1 Cor. 12:18-26)

- God has PURPOSELY made us diverse (vv. 18-20)
 - ✓ Throughout this passage it is clear that God is the One who sovereignly puts the church body together.
 - ✓ He puts the body together the way He wants; He makes our relationships just as He wants them.

- ✓ Cf. vv. 13, 18, 24, 27, 28 — we are brought into the body by the Spirit, God has placed the members where He wants them, God has composed the body according to His purposes, God has appointed the gifts in the body, and all this is the makeup of *Christ's* body — we belong to Him and He has made us the way He wants us.
- ✓ When we experience diversity, we're tempted to say, "I can't deal with that person," but we should say, "Thank You, God for this diversity and the way you have made this body."
- God has made us diverse to protect our UNITY (vv. 21-26)
 - ✓ When God created marriage, He created it with two different kinds of people: male and female. We say that He did that so that they would have complementary roles and functions in the marriage that would result in the one married couple being stronger than the two individuals would be outside of marriage. (The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.)
 - ✓ That same principle works in the body of the church. Notice the text:
 - v. 21 — no one can say, "***I have no need of you...***"
 - v. 22 — the weaker are necessary (internal organs are necessary to body function)
 - v. 23 — through diversity, the less honorable and less presentable are made presentable
 - v. 25 — through diversity of the body all the members receive the care they need and unity is protected.
 - ✓ If there were only administrators, no meals would be cooked for those who were ill (but we'd have a list and a process to get it done); if there were only those with helps, no one would be taught about how to help; if only teachers, there would be no one to teach and no one would leave the classroom to serve anyone. We need the diversity to care for one another.
 - ✓ Some in our body have reached a stage where it's easy to say, "I really don't need anyone." We may be financially "secure," no daily concerns about children, no question about career path and choice, the marriage is stable and secure. "We don't need anyone." So it would be easy to say, "I don't need the church." But Paul's very point in this passage is that if you are in that place, *the church needs you*. You are part of the diversity that God has given to the body to invest in the lives of others to care for them and strengthen them. The time may largely be past for you to receive care from the body; now is the time for you to invest even more in caring for others. That's another way that the Lord protects our unity.
- God has made us diverse to extend our TESTIMONY (v. 27; Eph. 2:11-22)
 - ✓ ***You are Christ's body***. Take all these dissimilar parts, put them together, and it makes one unified church body.
 - ✓ Remember that at the time that Paul wrote this, there were stronger cultural dynamics going on than we know today. There was no political correctness and tolerance. Jews *hated* Greeks,

slaves were mocked and even killed, and women were sneered at and derided. And in the body, all these groups were made spiritually equal. The world had to say, “Are you kidding me?”

“Ideally...the church itself is not made up of natural ‘friends.’ It is made up of natural enemies. What binds us together is not common education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common ancestry, common accents, common jobs, or anything else of that sort. Christians come together, not because they form a natural collocation, but because they have all been saved by Jesus Christ and owe him a common allegiance. In the light of this common allegiance, in the light of the fact that they have all been loved by Jesus himself, they commit themselves to doing what he says — and he commands them to love one another. In this light they are a band of natural enemies who love one another for Jesus’ sake.” [Carson, Love in Hard Places, 61.]

- ✓ Because of this we can make the following kinds of sacrifices to foster unity (*Compelling Community*, 81-2):
 - We can sacrifice our comfort to reach out and associate with someone whom we’re not naturally drawn to (e.g., can we initiate conversations with people we don’t know or with whom we are less comfortable?).
 - We can sacrifice our preferences (e.g., music in a worship service).
 - We can sacrifice our resources and time to serve fellow church members in need (1 Jn. 3:18).
 - We can sacrifice our habits to spend time with those whom we otherwise wouldn’t see (confession: too many times this year of being empty nesters, RJ has asked about being hospitable and I’ve said, “No — I just want to be with you...”).
- ✓ And what is the effect of this diversity? God has put us together in one body, as diverse as we are, for the very purpose of demonstrating to the world the power of the gospel to transform lives (**Jn. 13:34-35; Jn. 17:23b**). This is exactly what happened in Ephesus (Eph. 2:14-16).
- ✓ “Our strength — our ability to showcase supernatural gospel power — is our diversity.” [*Compelling Community*, 73.]
- ✓ God makes us diverse to make the world say, “How in the world does that group stay together?” And that makes us attractive to them so that they also will desire that kind of unity. And disharmony and disunity and lack of caring destroys that picture. God has made us diverse to manifest the greatness of His glory to an unbelieving world.

CONCLUSION:

Several years ago, the rock singer David Bowie said, “It’s been one of the banes of my life, not being able to develop proper relationships with people. I thought that I would always be a loner. Maybe that’s why I wanted so much to be a rock star. I unconsciously thought that if I was in that position, people wouldn’t be able to touch me. I often wonder if I wanted to outprice myself emotionally, put myself in a place where I didn’t have to relate to people because I found it such a burden.”

Relationships can be a burden. They can be difficult. But as we look at the church, relationships are not secondary; they are primary. And they are primary because it is one of the most basic ways that God demonstrates His great glory — He brings together people in unity and fellowship that no world system can ever conceive of doing. In any worldly organization, if you have trouble with relationships, you just leave. But not in the church. In the church we stay and work because God’s glory is at stake.