

BUILDING THE CHURCH: IT'S ABOUT PEOPLE
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 [granddaughter’s mother-in-law]. 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.” [Accessed at <https://bible.org/illustration/theory-relativity>.]

You can’t make up these stories. But this one does demonstrate that 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. And when they are hard, it’s tempting to leave a church and our relationships there. But that’s not God’s plan. He prioritizes preserving relationships.

At the State of the Church, we will be talking about plans for expanding facilities to meet the growing needs of our church body. But even as we talk about some real facility needs, we don’t want to forget about the priority of relationships: it’s about people. *Ministry is about people*. It’s easy to think about facilities, tasks, and roles and responsibilities, but behind all those tasks are relationships — and the simple, shepherding care of God’s people. [And GBC exists to shepherd God’s people.] So this morning we are going to do a survey of a variety of passages and then end up in 1 Corinthians 12, thinking about this theme:

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

As we think about the care of God’s people, we will notice **four truths** about relationships among God’s people in the church:

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, 9-10**; 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**

- ✓ Besides "brother," 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 “fellow” words 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. E.g., Col. 3:11.
 - 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. Whatever we do in the church body, we do in the context of relationships.

“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**.
 - ✓ 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, which then becomes a picture for a husband’s care of wife.
- 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 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 (not divided), so the body/church that He makes is one (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's triunity 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 (vv. 21ff; 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, we will run towards conflict to resolve it as soon as we can (Mt. 5:23ff), cultivating hearts of forgiveness.

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 ethnicities and they hate each other (the good Samaritan parable 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 and....
 - ✓ What we must notice is that Paul isn't trying to hide the differences and diversity; he is *highlighting* the diversity 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: young adults, young marrieds, middle-aged with children, middle-aged without children, older adults, men, women, singles, teenagers (youth), neighborhoods, professionals, laborers, ethnicities,...

- ✓ 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 — to work on those relationships.
- ✓ 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...). He has put us together diversely so in our diversity everyone's needs are met — and so we are not exalted, but that God is exalted.

“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 God clearly is the One who sovereignly puts the church body together. (These verses reiterate what we saw in vv. 12-17.)
- ✓ 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, 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 students and no one would leave the classroom to serve anyone. We *need* the diversity to care for one another.
- ✓ It's often tempting 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. "I 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. You may not be in a season where you need care from the body; but no matter your season, now is the time for you to invest even more in caring for others.
- ✓ Even more than raising money for facilities, we are raising servants and caregivers for others.
- ✓ That's another way that the Lord protects our unity. And it is a reminder that the focus of the church is people and working for their salvation and sanctification.

• 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 (v. 27) — that exemplifies the more excellent way of loving one another (12:31-13:1ff).
- ✓ 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 (CC, 81-2):
 - We can sacrifice our comfort to reach out and associate with someone to whom we're not naturally drawn (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.

- ✓ 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.” [CC, 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.
- ✓ And because of that, building the church always begins and ends with building relationships.

CONCLUSION: Two generations ago, A. W. Tozer wrote,

Some persons...find church intolerable because there is no objective toward which pastor and people are moving, aside possibly from the limited one of trying to enlist eight more women and 10 more men to chaperon the annual youth cookout or reaching the building fund quota for the month.

[Then he adds,] To Paul there was nothing dull or tiresome in the religion of Christ. God had a plan which was being carried forward to completion, and Paul and “all the faithful in Christ Jesus” were part of that plan.

...the knowledge that they were part of an eternal plan that *imparted unquenchable enthusiasm* to the early Christians. They burned with holy zeal for Christ and felt that they were part of an army which the Lord was leading to ultimate conquest over all the powers of darkness. That was enough to fill them with perpetual enthusiasm. [*The Set of the Sail*, 91; my emphasis.]

In a few minutes (and in the weeks and months ahead), we are going to talk about facilities. But facilities are not the goal. Our goal is people — our goal is gospel proclamation, discipleship, equipping, training leaders, and building Christ’s body for this generation — and the next one, too. That is why we are here. Relationships are what invigorate us with unquenchable enthusiasm for serving Christ’s church selflessly. In our individual diversity and uniqueness God has put us together in this church body so that we might care for one another (Christ’s people!) and that we will be mutually build up and matured.

We are building the church. The church is about people.

BENEDICTION: John 14:34-35