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In Christ

Members of One Another

Steve Flatt

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"Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." (Romans 12:4)

All the other world religions will usually talk about an appearance or a vision of their God. But the unique position of Christianity is that the One who existed before time and who created everything became flesh and lived among us as a human being in the form of Jesus of Nazareth. That is fundamental to Christianity, and there's nothing like it anywhere else in the world's religions. That's incarnation.

In one sense, the incarnation of Jesus didn't end with His ascension into heaven in Acts 1. Don't misunderstand, Jesus did ascend to heaven. He is seated at the right hand of the throne of God, and He will stay there until He comes back again to destroy the world and take home all those who are His.

In another sense Jesus continues. He continues to be lived out in the members of His body, the church. "And He is the head of the body, the church." (Colossians 1:18)

The Bible doesn't say the church is like the body of Christ. It doesn't say the church resembles the body of Christ. It clearly states "the church is the body of Christ." Therefore:

The church is not an organization, it is an organism.

It is essential to understanding who the Church is and what it does. The church is not an organization; it is an organism. Jesus continues to live, work and move through the members of His body. "So we in Christ form one body." (Romans 12:5) We are a contemporary expression of Jesus Christ, Himself.

If New Testament Christianity is to be restored to its original concept, the church must be restored and the institutional concepts eliminated. We need to get rid of the images, and the vocabulary that looks at the church as an organization. The church Christ established is an organism; it is the living and active Body of Christ.

Parts of the Body of Christ not Church Membership

Again, if New Testament Christianity is to be restored, the original concept of what body membership really means must be restored. I'm convinced that their proper understanding is based on an understanding of what it means to be as Paul said, "members of one another." That's exactly what Romans 12:5 says, "So in Christ we who are many form one body."

Now what does that word, "member" mean? We use it all the time, don't we, in connection with church. Have you placed your membership, yet? Are you a member of that church? We grow up hearing that term repeatedly. But let me suggest to you that we have often used it poorly. Most often "member" is used in an organization context and not in an organism context.

Let me illustrate the difference. What does it take to be a good member of an organization, "say the Rotary Club, the Kiwanis Club, or the local garden club?" It usually takes three things:

- a) attend some of the meetings, not all, but most,
- b) keep whatever rules and bylaws the club might have and

c) pay your dues. That's essential, that's how you become a member of good standing in a local club or organization.

How is one considered a member of good standing in the church? The criteria most often used are: a) how often does one attend?

b) does he live by the standards (keep the rules)

c) does he contribute (give a check) just about every Sunday. If the answer is yes then they're a good member at the So and So church.

I believe Scripture challenges that idea. See, you can be a good member of the Rotary Club; you can be a good member of the Kiwanis Club or the garden club without being closely and integrally bound to everybody else in the club. You don't have to be dependent upon those folks in order to be a good Kiwanian or Rotarian. Paul says that's not what body membership is. In the Body of Christ, each member belongs to the other. Let me suggest that far too many churches around the land practice club membership in their congregations. They don't consider themselves "members of one another."

It's like the difference between a pile of bricks and bricks that are cemented together in a wall. The pile of bricks isn't connected. Which one is useful for the purpose for which the bricks were designed? The pile of bricks, or the bricks that are fashioned into a wall? In which scenario is it easier to steal a brick? In too many churches the preachers and elders are running around trying to get things done by stacking bricks that aren't cemented together and worrying about the devil coming in and stealing one of those bricks when God wants those bricks to be cemented and bonded together. That's the idea of a body.

You don't lose a member of your physical body without knowing it, do you? I know I've got absent-minded children, but I've never looked at one and said, "Where did your hand go?" "I don't know, I had it when I left this morning." But in a body, members are so connected they don't just fall away, they don't just disappear. That's the point. Christians are body members. That's what it takes to make us alive in Christ.

"The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we are all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

"Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body,

but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

"Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." (1 Corinthians 12:12-27) Implications of meaning of body membership.

1. Membership involves dependency.

The concept of body membership helps us understand that no Christian can function effectively by himself. I am very fond of my hand. I use it to touch, point, grasp, write, and for all kinds of things. It is very useful to me as long as it's attached to my body. But the moment it's no longer attached to my body, it is no longer useful to me. In fact, it will begin to putrefy and decay if detached.

In exactly the same way Christians outside the Body will decay. You can assemble every Sunday, sit in a pew, even give your money, but, that alone will not prevent spiritual decay. You must be integrally connected to the Body to prevent decay. You've got to be connected. You need to have some people that are integrally concerned about you, that know you and check on you regularly.

Every member of the body needs a group with whom they pray, share personally one-on-one, listen, and respond in a time of need immediately, people with whom they are directly loving and nurturing. If you think you don't need that, the Apostle Paul disagrees with you for he stated "The eye can't say to the ear, 'I don't need you.' And the head can't say to the foot, 'I don't need you.'" That's not how body membership works.

Independence is an American virtue, but it is not a Christian virtue. Sometimes we tend to think in our culture that anything that is a good American value has got to be a good Christian value; often it is, but sometimes it is not. Sometimes as Americans, we boast of our independence. Christians should not boast of scriptural independence, but rather boast of dependence upon God and the body for our spiritual health. The body is not made so that its members can be independent of one another.

Have you ever eaten a piece of food that was bad? The food didn't really go bad; what happened is some bacteria got on that food. One time I ate a piece of chicken. When it got in my stomach the gastric juices met that chicken and the bacteria in the chicken. The bacteria said to the gastric juices in the stomach, "Oh, how do you do? What can we do for you?" The gastric juices said to the bacteria "No, you don't understand, it's what we're going to do for you. We're here to dissolve you and break you down along with this chicken and to gradually just absorb you to where you become a part of this body." The bacteria said, "Oh, no, no, no, I don't want to do that. See I want to retain my identity. I don't want you breaking me down. I want to stay just like I am." The gastric juices said, "No, you don't understand, that's not the way it works around here; we break everything down so that we're a unit, we are part of a body." The bacteria said, "No, you're not breaking me down." The gastric juices said, "Well, if we don't break you down, you leave the body." About midnight we disfellowshipped the bacteria in a very unpleasant way.

Do you see the point? In a body, either you are integrated into the body dependent upon it, or you leave. Our bodies are not designed to tolerate absolute independence. Do you remember the story of an independent church in the Bible? Its name was Laodicea. They thought they had it altogether, and Jesus said to them in Revelation 3, you say you're rich and you don't need a thing, but let me tell you what you are: "You're wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked." What did He say He was going to do? "I will spew

you out of my mouth." Folks, we're not in the body of Christ if we don't need each other. If we don't need each other, we're not in the body.

2. Membership emphasizes equality.

"Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." (Romans 12:4-5) The context of that passage is Romans 12:3 "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you." Why? Then he goes on to say because we are all just parts of a body.

Have you ever seen a picture of a lung? Have you ever seen a picture of a liver? They're not very pretty, are they? I don't care for them. I'd much rather see a picture of a pretty hand, or a pretty face. But what God has deliberately done is designed the unseen less sightly parts to allow the visible parts to do what they do. You know I'd rather see a face than a lung. But a face can be a pretty ugly thing if the lung is not working.

Some people think the visible parts of Christ's body; i.e., the preachers and teachers, are more important than other people of the Body. Not so, not any more important than the face is any more important than the heart or the lungs. In reality the visible parts can only function because the many invisible parts of the body have all been working together performing their much needed function. See all the members of the body are important; that's why we care about one another.

But clubs and organizations don't operate that way. They have a hierarchy, a pecking order or pyramid. Clubs operate on this principle. Visibility is equated to significance. If you don't believe that, just go to the annual club dinner. Do you want to know who the most important people are in that club? It's easy, just look at who is at the head table. Who's going to stand up at that podium, and who's going to speak over and over again? Those are the chief Kahunas, those are the ones who are more important. In a club and most organizations, visibility is equal to importance, but a body doesn't think that way. If anything, the less visible parts of the body are more important than the visible parts.

Paul said at the end of 1 Corinthians 12, and whenever one part hurts, it doesn't matter if it's big, little, visible, or invisible; every part comes to help it.

I'm not a handyman by any stretch of the imagination. This happened many years ago and is part of the reason I'm not a handyman now. I was out hammering something in the garage, putting up a shelf, and I was sitting there hammering away. I got a little cocky and I hit the nail. It was the wrong nail. It was my thumbnail. Have you ever done that? You burst a thumbnail, blood is coming out and you're wondering if it's broken. You don't think or say, "Why you stupid thing, it's your own fault. I'll just let you dangle there and maybe you'll just rot off." No! Everything hurts the nervous system and sends the alarm all the way through the body, and the saliva glands act like the immediate EMT—the legs are the ambulance, they start running to the bathroom, and the voice is a siren "OWWWWW!" The whole body begins to say, "Help the little thumb, help the little thumb, help the little thumb." Oh when it finally soothes, you say, "Oh, that is so much better, that's the way it works in a body." I count you important because you belong to me. The Christians belong to one another and like it or not, I belong to you. We're a body—hand and arm, leg and foot, eye and brain.

3. Membership demands unity.

In 1 Corinthians 12:12 Paul said, "the body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts." The American Standard says, "The body is one, though it has many members." God has deliberately designed your body to love harmony and hate discord.

I keep using these physical illustrations, personally, but those are the ones I know best and we're talking about a body. Some time ago I was in a basketball game, likely the last basketball game that I ever will play in. I was going one way, planted the left foot and the whole body was still going left, but from this knee down, decided, no, I'm going to stay right where I am. Then it happened — something snapped. See, a body will not tolerate disharmony. The body hates it when members go against each other and fight against each other.

God wants the incarnation of Jesus to continue in the lives of Christians. He wants the world to see Jesus living in our lives. Nothing will destroy the purpose of the continuing incarnation of Jesus quicker or more completely than division in the body. That's why Paul said "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:3)

Unity takes effort, doesn't it? It takes work and discipline to keep a physical body working well. You can be assured the devil is furiously determined to keep the church from living out the continuing incarnation. Do you know how he's trying to shut us down? Somebody says, "Well, through false doctrine." Yes. He'll use that if he can. But hear me, for every one church you will see fall to false doctrine, you will see 50 ravaged by a split and by a divisive spirit. "We must make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit."

Do you know what that means practically? It means make every effort to stay away from gossip. It means make every effort not to be jealous of somebody else here. It means make every effort not to be suspicious. It means if you don't know something, ask and make every effort to not speculate. Make every effort to stay away from anything that would bring discord in the body. No body stays healthy that fights itself.

Precious few physical bodies are destroyed by something on the outside. There aren't many bodies that are destroyed by a gunshot, a bomb going off, or a car wreck; there are some, but not many. How do most bodies die? Most bodies die from the inside out. They die because of cancer, heart attacks or strokes. Most people die because the body goes to war against itself. That is how most churches are destroyed because the members of the body lose sight of their commitment to unity.

That means occasionally those who would disrupt the unity of the body need to be confronted, gently, lovingly, and in a spirit of peace. But the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace is important enough that Paul said, "You make every effort to keep it."

In summary, we've got to learn to think Biblically about what it means to have membership in a body. How do you do that personally on your level? Look at the conclusion, two thoughts as we close.

1. Assess your own involvement

What kind of membership are you holding? Organization or organism? Body or club? Have you substituted something comfortable for something Biblical? How healthy would a church be if everybody practiced your form of membership?

One of the things I've noted as I looked through Paul's illustration about the church as the body of Christ with hands, feet, a head, ears, and eyes. He even talks about ligaments, but he never says anything about fat. The Holy Spirit wants it strong and lean and not just hanging around. Now I know there are some of

you who are hurting, and you desire to be healed. You need to be healed but there comes a time when as you are healed by the body and the blood that flows through it, that you then take your role as a healer. You don't just stay hanging around doing nothing.

2. Assume initiative.

Don't just wait until somebody asks you to do something. Bodies don't just get in shape sitting around, do they? You don't sit on that couch and just suddenly get in shape. It takes discipline; it takes work. It's the same thing in the Body of Christ. It starts with a regular check-up. Examine yourself and ask, "Am I who I need to be? What discipline do I need to apply?" You need to eat spiritual food now, exercise by involving yourself in ministry.

If you are not a Christian, and you want to be a member of that kind of body, then understand what God desires. Put your trust and faith in Him, confess your belief that Jesus is God who came to earth in the flesh to be the atoning sacrifice for your sin, turn from your sinful ways and die to them. Be buried with Him in baptism, allow Him to raise you to a new creation and add you to His Body, His Church. That's the body Christ is going to take with Him to heaven one day.

Maybe you need to come back to the Lord, be restored from spiritual sickness and get His blood pumping through again so you become an active, vital, and dependent part of the body. We want you to be that.
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