

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 19, 2014**

BEING THE CHURCH (3)

1 Corinthians 12:12-17

PREVIOUSLY

The past two Sundays we have looked at several descriptions of the church in 1 Peter 2, where the apostle Peter says that we who are followers of Jesus Christ and members of His church are like “living stones” made spiritually alive by God and now being used by God in the construction of a magnificent spiritual edifice in which Jesus, the irreplaceable “living Stone,” is Himself the cornerstone, chosen by God and indescribably precious to Him (2:4-8). It is all God’s doing, all by grace, and all to God’s glory.

Then, as we have seen, Peter goes on to describe the church as “a chosen people,” chosen and commissioned by God; “a royal priesthood” in which we have direct, unhindered access to the presence of God and the privilege of praying for one another; “a holy nation” set apart by God for His kingdom purposes; and “a people belonging to God” (2:9a).

What is God’s purpose in all of this? Peter gives the answer: “That (we) may declare the praises of Him who called (us) out of [spiritual and moral] darkness into His wonderful light” (2:9b) – the light of the truth and power of the gospel. Paul uses this same imagery of light and darkness in Philippians 2, where he says that we are to “shine like stars” in the night sky in the midst of “a crooked and depraved generation” (Philippians 2:15). Another way to say it is that we are to “carry the light-giving Message” (2:16, MSG) of the gospel into the darkness of a world that too often prefers the darkness to the light.

Then, as we also noted last Sunday, Peter points out that though we are in the world, as followers of Christ we do not belong to the world. We belong to God. We are, as Peter reminds us, “aliens and strangers in the world” (1 Peter 2:11), called out from the world by God to be His people, His messengers and agents in the world. In the world but not of it.

Each of these word pictures gives us a valid and valuable way of seeing and understanding the nature of the church and its God-ordained purpose in the world today.

DISTORTED IMAGES

Not everyone, however, has a correct view of the church and its purpose. Here are a few distorted pictures of the church:

Some people – some Christians, some church members – see the church as little more than a *spiritual gas station*. It is the place where you get your spiritual gas tank filled up when you’re running low. Hear a good sermon, be inspired by some good music, and hope it will be enough to get you through the next week.

Closely related is the idea of the church as a *convenience store*. You may be very glad the convenience store is there, because it is, well, so convenient. It is there for *your* convenience. But you go there only when it is convenient for you or there is something you need. Some Christians, some church members, treat church that way.

Another distorted way of looking at the church is to view it with a *movie theater mentality*. I don't mean it in the sense of spilling popcorn or leaving lots of trash for someone else to clean up. Nor is this a dig at churches that actually meet in movie theaters. Holding worship services in movie theaters is a terrific idea, and it may be much less threatening to an unchurched or de-churched person than actually walking into a church building. What I mean about having a movie theater mentality is seeing the church as a place that offers entertainment. If entertainment is what you want, some churches can offer much higher quality entertainment than others. Some churches compete with other churches to see who can put on the best "show" each week. I hope that is not why you come to church. I don't want you to be bored when you come to worship here at Faith. In fact, if we approach it properly, worship should never be boring. But true worship is not about being entertained. True worship is about an encounter with God Himself. It is about remembering what God has done, praising Him for who He is, proclaiming His redeeming love, celebrating His amazing grace, and giving ourselves to serve His purposes. True worship is something we *do*, not something we merely listen to or watch. True worship requires the response of your whole being – heart, soul, mind, and strength.

One more distorted picture: Seeing the church as a *drug store*, as the place where you go to fill the prescription to deal with the pain or hurt in your life. Can the church be God's instrument to help you deal with the pain in your life? Absolutely. I hope it does. I hope it has. But there is more to God's purpose for the church than providing therapy to help us feel better.

The basic, bottom-line, biblical understanding of the church is that it is first of all neither a place nor a building nor any of the distorted images I've just mentioned. It is, as Peter says, a people. The people of God. The *ekklesia*. The "called-out" people of God. Called out from the world by God to be His people *in* the world.

THE BODY OF CHRIST

Today let's look at the apostle Paul's description of the church as a body. Not just any body, but the body of Christ in the world. In the passage we read from 1 Corinthians 12, Paul uses the word "body" 17 times. He makes the connection between the human body and the church in verse 12, where he says: "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." As it is with your physical body and mine, so it is with the church as the spiritual body of Christ. Paul summarizes the point in verse 27, where he says: "Now *you* are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."

1 Corinthians 12 isn't the only place where we find this analogy of the church as a body. In Romans 12:4-5 Paul writes: "Just as each of you 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.”

Paul picks up this theme in Ephesians 4 as well, where he says: “There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4-6). A few verses later he says that God calls and gifts some to specific ministries – to be apostles or prophets or evangelists or pastors or teachers – in order to prepare, to train, to equip God’s people – *all of us* – for the works of service to which the Lord calls us all as followers of Christ and members of His church.

Why? What is God’s purpose in doing this? It is, Paul says, “so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, and become mature” – *spiritually* mature – “attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (4:11-13). God’s purpose is that “we will in all things grow up into Him who is the head” of the body, “that is, Christ. From Him” – meaning, from Christ, the head of the church, “the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (4:15-16).

I have known a lot of truly remarkable Christian men and women in my life. I’m sure you have, too. But I don’t know anyone who has ever attained to “the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” in this life. *The Message* paraphrase speaks of God’s desire for us to move “rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful in response to God’s Son, fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ” (4:13, *MSG*). None of us has arrived there yet. But that is God’s goal for you and me as members of His church, and for all of us together as the body of Christ in the world. As it says in *The Message*, “God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love – like Christ in everything. We take our lead from Christ, who is the source of everything we do. He keeps us in step with each other. His very breath and blood flow through us, nourishing us so that we will grow up healthy in God, robust in love” (4:14-16, *MSG*).

Fully alive like Christ. Like Christ in everything. Healthy in God, robust in love. I think this is a beautiful picture of what God desires for every local body of believers and for the worldwide body of Christ.

You are the body of Christ,” Paul says, “and each one of you” – from the least to the greatest, from the youngest to the oldest, from the weakest to the strongest, from the poorest to the most affluent, from every race and nation of origin – “is a part of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27). No exceptions.

Question: Do you know how many bones there are in the human body?

Answer: 206.

That is just bones. Add in muscles, joints, tendons, ligaments, hair (for people who have it), flesh, veins and arteries, nerves, eyes, ears, nose, mouth, teeth, tongue, fingers, hands, arms, legs, feet, toes, internal organs, and every other part of the body I’ve not mentioned, and you

get an idea of just how complex, how intricately and masterfully designed, and how fascinating the human body is. As David exclaims in Psalm 139, truly we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14).

There are many parts, many members, in the body. But all the parts come together to form one body. In the body of Christ, as in the human body, every member matters. Every member of the body has a particular role to play, a job to do, a purpose to fulfill, in the healthy functioning of the church as the body of Christ. Every member of the body. Every follower of Christ. Including you. God’s Word says so.

In the body of Christ, we are not all the same. You already knew that. It is intuitively obvious to the most casual observer. We are not all alike. We come from different backgrounds. We have different life experiences. We don’t all have the same skin color. We are not all “wired” in the same way. We have different “love languages.” We have different interests. We have different tastes in food and fashion and music. We have different skills, different abilities and aptitudes. And we have different gifts.

DIFFERENT GIFTS

We have been gifted by the Holy Spirit in different ways, gifted to do different things as members of this body of Christ, and as part of the whole body of Christ in the world. Many of you do things in the life and ministry of the body of Christ here at Faith that I couldn’t do half as well as you, because our gifts and abilities are different. Our passions may be different, too. You may be passionate about a particular need or ministry. I may be passionate about a different area of ministry. If our passion is God-given, it may be an indication of the place of service God has for us in His body, the church.

Bottom line: The New Testament teaches that every believer, every true follower of Christ, has received at least one “spiritual gift,” maybe more, and God wants each of us to use our gift(s) in the body, for the health and well-being of the body, as parts of the body.

If your gift is teaching, you need to be teaching. If your gift is hospitality, you need to use your gift to help others feel welcome and valued, whether it is in your home or here at church. If your gift is fixing things, you need to use your gift to help people who haven’t got a clue, or who can’t afford the home repairs or car repairs they need. If your gift is music, you need to exercise your gift in a ministry of music that brings glory to God and blesses the people of God. If your gift is serving, you need to use your gift in acts of service. If your gift is holding babies or changing diapers, if your gift is loving kids and giving them tender, loving care, you need to be involved in some way in a ministry to children. (Even if it is not your gift, if you’re able, we need your help in fulfilling the promises we make as a church family whenever a child is baptized or dedicated.) If you have the gift of mercy or compassion, you need to use your gift by finding ways to care for people in special need. Whatever your gift, God wants you to use it in the body as part of the body for the health and well-being of the body as a whole.

THE CHURCH NEEDS YOU

The body of Christ here at Faith needs you. Every one of you. Every part of the body is needed. For the body of Christ at Faith Church to be healthy and strong, for this body of Christ to fulfill its God-given mission *to know Christ and to make Him known* in Kingstowne and northern Virginia, for Faith Church to be a place of grace where Jesus is Lord and everybody counts, every part of the body has to do its part.

If you think it is OK to be a follower of Jesus but to distance yourself from participation in the life of the church, which is His body, you have misunderstood Jesus. You have misunderstood the gospel. You have misunderstood the teaching of the Bible about being part of the people of God. If you belong to the Lord Jesus Christ by faith, you belong to His body, too. Being a Christian is not just about believing in Jesus and having a personal relationship with Him as your Savior and Lord. It is also about belonging to His church, the body of which He is the head. When you place your trust in Christ, when you become a Christian, you also become a part of His body. Which means that we belong to God *and* to each other. We are all intertwined. Interdependent. Interconnected.

Let me ask you again the question I asked last Sunday: Do you just come to church? Or are you an active, functioning member of the body of Christ here at Faith? Some of you may not be able to serve in ways you used to serve because of changed circumstances in your life. I understand. The Lord understands. But there may still be a way for you to serve as a member of the body.

For some others, it may be that you're not really involved in any form of ministry because you don't want to be involved. You come to church in order to get something out of it, not to give or serve or use whatever gift God has given you. I'm not pointing fingers at anyone today. I'm simply saying that this is how it is with too many church people in too many churches. Jesus, the head of the body, the Lord of the church, doesn't want it to be this way in the body of Christ here at Faith, or in the church anywhere in the world. He wants each of you to find your place in the body not only in worship, but in relationships that honor God and in ministries that meet real needs, using the gift(s) He has given you so that the whole body may work together and grow together to become "fully mature" in Christ, "fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ ... like Christ in everything ... healthy in God, robust in love" (Ephesians 4:13, 15, 16).

Lord, let it be so in us. Let it be so in this body of Christ here at Faith, and in the body of Christ everywhere in the world. To the glory, honor, and praise of Your name. Amen.