

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 30, 2012**

BEING THE BODY

1 Corinthians 12:1-12, 27

I want to talk about you today – that is, you plural, you collectively, all of you together. And you individually, you personally.

What I want to talk about is the church, of which each of us individually and all of us together are a part, if we have come to know and trust and follow Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of our lives. I want to talk about the church the way it is and the church as God designed it. I want to talk about the church we are, right here at Faith, and about being the church God created us to be. I want to talk about God's design for you, for me, for each of us, as His dearly loved children and members of His church through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is what I think God wants me to talk about today.

The first thing I want to tell you is how proud I am of you, how proud I am of you for the way so many of you gave of yourselves to help us host the Presbytery of the East meeting this weekend. You all made your pastor look awfully good by everything you did to extend such warm, loving, generous, gracious, servant-hearted hospitality to our brothers and sisters and friends from all over the Presbytery. To Ben and Lauren Huff, Jim and Linda McClelland, Don and Barbara Hanger, Bruce and Lois Alexander, Jerry and Kathy Seager, Bob Van Tine, Len Deibert, Mary Zoorob, Susan Booher, Toni Gregory, the "Kitchen Angels," the Praise Team, all our musicians and ushers and greeters, and everyone else who had a role in it: Thank you! Thank you all! Way to go! I salute you. I praise God for you. And I think God is pleased with the way all of you (that's "all y'all," for those of you who speak Southern) served our guests with cheerfulness and in love.

The second thing I want to tell you is that I love this church. I love Faith Church. I love *you*. I hope you know it. Even so, it is good to say it every so often. I am blessed to be your pastor, to have the privilege of talking to you about God and of talking to God about you. I am so glad that in His providence God called me here 15-plus years ago, so grateful for the privilege of knowing you, experiencing the joys and sorrows of life with you, and growing with you in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18).

You know that Faith isn't a perfect church. I don't need to tell you that. And, of course, as long as I'm the pastor, it never will be. Like any church, we have our strengths and weaknesses as a church family. We do some things better than other things. We're more gifted in some areas than in others. Some members of our church family have a strong sense of commitment to the ministry of our church as an expression of your commitment to live as a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. Others in our church family seem content to stay on the sidelines of ministry. Or maybe they feel like they have nothing to offer. If you are one who feels this way, I hope you will come to see that it just isn't so, and that God has gifted every true believer in Christ – every member of His church – with some spiritual endowment to be used in a ministry that honors God, blesses people, and serves to build up the church. Maybe

you already believe this, at least in theory, but you're not sure what God has gifted you to do, or you're not sure how or where God wants you to serve Him. As we think together in the next few weeks about "being the body" here at Faith – the body of *Christ* in this community, I hope you will gain a clearer understanding of the gift(s) God has given you and the place(s) where God wants you to serve Him in the church or the world. Or both.

One of the things I love and appreciate most about Faith is that this is a church with a rich heritage of fidelity to the Bible as the Word of God and to the historic doctrines of orthodox Christian faith. This is a church that holds fast to the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. It is a church characterized by a passionate love for God and a sincere love for one another.

Sometimes, it is true, we fail to put into action the love we profess, whether in our relationships with one another or in our love toward God. As a result, we humbly admit our need for grace, not only the grace by which we are saved, but also the sanctifying and sustaining grace of the Holy Spirit, by which and through which we experience an inner transformation and grow to reflect more and more the character of Christ. We eagerly and gladly confess that it is all by grace, which comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. Like me. And you. And, as recipients of God's grace, we endeavor with the help of the Holy Spirit to extend grace to one another, and to others whom God places in our lives. This recognition of the "amazingness" of grace and our desire for the church to be a place of grace are among the things I love and appreciate most about Faith.

Sometimes, though, people get some wrong ideas about church. I'm not sure where these originated, but here are a few distorted images of the church:

1. The church as a *gas station*. Some people see church as the place where you fill up your spiritual gas tank when you're running low. Hear a good sermon, and it will give you enough fuel to make it through the week. (A good sermon can do you a lot of good, but you shouldn't count on it to give you all the spiritual nourishment you need for the coming week.)
2. The church as a *movie theater*. Some churches meet in movie theaters. There is nothing wrong with that. Thinking that church is like a movie theater is different. This happens when people view the church as a place that offers entertainment. You go to get away from your problems and be entertained, hopefully in comfortable seats. When it's over, you come out smiling and feeling better than when you went in.
3. The church as a *drug store*. Some people think of church as the place where you can fill the prescription to deal with the pain in your life. In this view, the purpose of the church is primarily therapeutic. (It is true that the church can help you deal with the pain or hurt or brokenness in your life, because it is the church's mission to point people to God the Great Physician, the One who can heal all our diseases, who can forgive all our sins, who can redeem our lives from the pits of despair, loneliness, anger, envy, greed, and hate. But we must make sure we never reduce the message of the gospel and of the Bible as a whole to a "pill" whose purpose is to relieve our pain. It is much, much bigger than that.)

4. The church as a *big box retailer*. No one should mistake Faith for a big box retailer, because we're not big enough to provide all the "products" you can find in a much bigger church. But this is how some people view church, and it is what they want the church to be and do. They want the church to be a place that offers the best products in a clean and safe environment for the whole family. Especially for children and teens. Or for young adults. Or young families. Or ... you fill in the blank. They are looking for quality service at a low price – all in one stop. (Adapted from Colin Smith, "The Church: Sharing the Passion of Jesus," posted at www.preachingtoday.com.)

We may instantly see deficiencies in these views of the church, and yet in our own ways we may be guilty of fostering an unbiblical attitude toward the church. Our YP or Young Professionals Group is currently studying the book *Comforts from the Cross* by Elyse Fitzpatrick. In another book, *Because He Loves Me*, she writes about a trip to Europe she and her husband took several years ago. Perhaps some of you will be able to identify with their experience. In less than four weeks, they visited 13 different countries. "When we'd enter a country," she says, "we'd get our passports stamped ... learn a few key phrases and then off we'd go ... We'd wander through outdoor markets, peruse museums, and sample the cuisine. We'd exchange a few niceties with the locals, sit on the steps of the cathedrals, watch the life of the town go by, take a picture or two ... purchase a little something to remind us of our time there, and then we were off. We had a wonderful vacation. Our hearts weren't changed in any significant ways by our little visits, but then they weren't meant to be. We were tourists."

There is nothing wrong with being tourists. Washington has throngs of them. But Elyse Fitzpatrick goes on to say that the tourist experience is uncomfortably close to the way a lot of people look at the church. "On any given Sunday," she observes, "many tourists can be found in church." They pop in for an hour or so, sing a few songs, enjoy a cup of coffee and exchange niceties with the locals. And then, she says, they race to their cars to get to their favorite restaurant before the rush or to get home before kickoff. Their relationship to church is like being a tourist.

God did not design and create the church to be used like a gas station, a movie theater, a drug store, or a big box store. Nor did God ordain and establish the church to be a tourist attraction. The Bible employs different images or metaphors to describe the church and its God-ordained purpose. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul uses the metaphor of the body. He introduces the metaphor in verse 12, where he says: "The body is a unit [a whole], though it is made up of many parts. And though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ." In verse 27 he says: "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." (When he says, *You are*, the word *you* is plural, and he says it emphatically: *You are the body of Christ*.) In between verses 12 and 27 Paul goes to considerable lengths to make the point that every part of the body serves a purpose. Every part of the human body has a contribution to make to the well-being of the whole body. And every part of the body of Christ – the church – has a contribution to make to the health and well-being of the whole.

What does this mean? It means that no part of the body of Christ – no member of the church – can legitimately say to another: "I don't need you." No part of the body can go it alone.

No part of the body – the church – has the right to look down on any other part of the body, as if to say: “I’m more important than you.” And no part of the body can legitimately say: “I have nothing to offer. The body – the church – doesn’t need me.” No, says Paul. We all need each other, if we are to be the church, if we are to be the outpost of the kingdom of God we are called to be here in northern Virginia. Each of us has a place and a purpose in the body of Christ – the church. And we all need each other to fulfill God’s purposes for this body in this place in this generation.

This requires way, way more than the casual attitude of a tourist. It requires way, way more than the kind of religious consumer mentality represented by the view of the church as a gas station, a movie theater, a drug store, or a big box store. What it calls for, first of all, is a wholehearted, loving surrender to the Head and Savior of the body, the Lord Jesus Christ. What it calls for, second, is a commitment in love to and for one another in the body of Christ, which is the church. It calls for a commitment to love and serve God by loving, serving, and caring for one another in the family of the church. It goes one step further, too. It calls for a commitment in love to reach out to the world beyond the church – to share the gospel of God’s grace with those who are spiritually lost and to minister to people in all kinds of need with mercy and compassion.

This three-fold commitment – to the Lord Jesus Christ, to one another in the body of Christ, and to the work of Christ in the world – is the calling of the church as a whole. It is also the calling of each one of us – you, me, all of us – as individual members of the body of Christ right here. Each and every one of us. Not the 1% who are really devoted or really gifted or both. Not the 20% who do 80% of the work in so many churches and other organizations. Not the 47% or the 53%. All of us. Which includes you. And me.

To this end, Paul tells us, for this purpose, God has given every Christian without exception some spiritual gift(s) to be used in ministry. There are no exceptions. No one is left out – that is, no true believer in Christ is left out. As Paul says in verse 7, “To each one the manifestation [or gift] of the Spirit is given for the common good.” He is not talking about just the Corinthians. He is talking about us, too, about everyone who belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ by faith – everyone who is part of the body of Christ. *To each one*. Which, again, includes you and me. Ray Stedman put it this way: “All God’s children have gifts” (*Body Life*, 38). *All God’s children*.

In verse 4, Paul says there are varieties of gifts or *charismaton*. In verse 5, he speaks of various avenues of service or *diakonion*. In verse 6, he speaks of different ways of working, different operations or *energmaton* of God’s power. In all three verses, Paul uses different words to say the same thing. He is saying that there is tremendous diversity in the gifts God gives to His people for ministry; there is a multitude of ways to serve God; and God’s power is displayed in the exercise of diverse spiritual gifts. But God is behind them all. And the Holy Spirit is sovereignly at work in and through all of them.

Every true Christian is gifted for ministry in some way. Every true Christian has been given some spiritual gift(s), some new capacity for serving God in and through the church. And the power to use your gift(s) for God’s purposes comes from God the Holy Spirit. It is not the

power of a strong, charismatic personality. It is not simply the power of positive thinking or possibility thinking or any other kind of man-centered thinking. It is not the kind of power that comes from an Ivy-league education or a sharp mind. It is the power of God the Holy Spirit, who comes to make His dwelling in the life of every Christian – every member of the body – and gives us gifts to develop and use not to call attention to ourselves or to say: “Hey! Look at me! See how gifted I am?” Rather, our gifts are to be used, as Paul points out in verse 7, “for the common good.” For the benefit of others. To be a blessing to the church as a whole. To be a blessing in some particular ministry. Or even to bless the world in some way.

You – each and every one of you – have been endowed and equipped by the Holy Spirit with some spiritual gift(s) that you are responsible to discover, develop, and exercise. In his classic book *Body Life*, Ray Stedman made this powerful point that I want to leave with you today: “It takes the whole church to do the work of the church. To this end each and every Christian is endowed with certain gifts” (146, 147). *The whole church. Each and every Christian.* Stedman said this also: “It is vitally essential that you discover the gift or gifts you possess, for the value of your life as a Christian will be determined by the degree to which you use (what) God has provided you.” That is a strong statement. But Stedman is really on to something.

I feel like I’m just getting started. But it is time to stop for now. Think carefully and prayerfully about the church as the body of Christ. The church is not a gas station or a movie theater. It is not a pharmacy or a big box retailer offering everything under the sun. It is not merely a place for tourists to visit. It is the body of Christ. *We* are the body of Christ, and *each one of us* is a part of it. Which means that *each one of us* has received a gift of the Spirit to be used in ministry. Which also means that *you* are needed, *your service* is needed, to make the body of Christ here at Faith strong and vibrant, and to enable us to become the church we were created to be. For the glory of God. For the building up of the church. And to be a blessing to the world.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.