

One Body, Many Members

Romans 12:3-8

What is the Church? Do you see the Church as an interconnected network of individuals working together to serve a higher purpose? Do you see yourself as an integral member of the Church? Do you love the Church? More specifically: In what ways do you need the other members of Faith Church? In what ways do the other members of Faith Church need you?

Every member of the Church needs every other member of the Church. We are all inter-dependent upon one another. This inter-dependence is both relational and organizational. Relationally, this means that God has designed us to know one another and to help one another. We are not to live in isolation from other believers, nor to be fully independent from them. Don't worry, introverts do not have to become extroverts. Every person is different. Every relationship will look different. It is good to have relational variety.

And organizationally, every member is inter-dependent with institution of the Church. The Church functions together as a whole. And each member has some role that contributes to the overall organization of the Church.

In Romans 12:1-2, Paul established the core principle through which every area of our sanctification will flow. What is this core principle: We are transformed by the renewal of our mind.

By the Holy Spirit infusing new patterns of thinking, and feeling, that are in agreement with God's thoughts expressed in His Word, we are transformed. And the first area in which Paul wants our minds transformed is how we think and feel about the Church.

Read Romans 12:3-8.

The Church is like a body. The inter-dependence of the members of the church with one another is similar to the inter-dependence of the members of our physical bodies. God has designed the human body in such a way as to help us understand the Church. There is an analogous relationship between the human body and the Church. But the Church is not simply "like" a body.

The Church IS the body of Christ.

Ephesians 1:22-23 ²² And he (God) put all things under his (Jesus') feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Where is Jesus today? His resurrected body is seated at the right hand of God in the heavenlies. But according to this verse, the body of Jesus Christ is here. He is not simply among us. The Church IS his body. And as if to state it even more unbelievably, Paul says that the Church, the body of Jesus, is the "fullness of Jesus".

How are we to define the Church? What are her parameters? The Church includes all those who have been baptized into the name of Jesus Christ. She is gathered into local congregations spread out throughout the world. We recognize that not all the members of the Church now are true members of the eternal Church. On the judgment day, Jesus will separate out many goats from the true sheep. And only in eternity will the Church be perfectly pure. Even so, we are still to view the currently imperfect visible church as the body of Jesus Christ.

The Church is not some nebulous, unknowable, informal group of individuals. The Church is a distinct body, distinct from the world through baptism, the visible sign marking one as belonging to Jesus Christ. And even though there is only one body of Christ throughout the world, through all ages, we are to view our individual congregation as a small microcosm of the global church. We are the body of Christ here at Faith Church.

We are not trying to become a body. We are his body. Consider your own body. You may wish your body was different. Your body may not function as well as you might like it to function. But there is nothing that you can do to make your body more "your body." The same is true of the Church. The Church IS the body of Christ.

Renewing your mind on this point alone will transform how you relate to the other members of His body. But there is more, much more...

³ For by the grace given to me
I say to everyone among you
not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think,
but
to think with sober judgment,
each according to the measure of faith

that God has assigned. (distributed)

You are a member of the Body of Christ. Consider your own body with its various members. Which member of your body best describes who you are in the body of Christ?

Are you a hand? Are you a foot? Are you some internal organ? What member of the body best describes you? Some of you have a low view of yourself. You may see yourself as the appendix of the body – not really knowing how you fit, or what is your purpose. But Paul assumes that many will have the opposite problem. They will think of themselves more highly than they ought.

Paul may have thought of himself as the mouth of the Body of Christ. Or maybe he considered himself as one of the thighs, a strong pillar of the Church. Paul was after all an Apostle. And there were not many Apostles. Thinking of Paul as a mouth or a thigh seems about right. But even as a mouth, or a thigh, Paul views himself soberly. What do I mean by this?

Paul does not believe who he is as an apostle is a demonstration of his own greatness. Paul's relative importance in the Body was entirely due to God's grace. God's grace had not only redeemed Paul, but it was also distributed into Paul specifically so as to give him a particular role in the body of Christ. In Paul's case it was to be an apostle. Paul was an apostle because God's grace made him so. Since Paul was who he was by God's grace, there was no reason to think of himself more highly than others who were not Apostles.

What is more, Paul's role and giftedness was not assigned by God for Paul to feel superior to other members of the body. God assigned Paul his specific place to serve the whole body and to enable her to function as a body. In the same way that Paul evaluated himself, he challenges the Romans to evaluate themselves.

God looks at you as an individual, to be sure. But he does not look at you in isolation from the rest of his body. In his grace, God has designed your strengths, your abilities, your skills, even your relative devotion to God to complement and work together with the strengths, abilities, skills, and devotion of the other members of his body.

A sober judgment of yourself takes into consideration two important truths:

1. Whatever you possess, you possess from God's gracious hand.
2. Whatever you possess, has been given to you for the benefit of the entire body.

If you forget or deny either of these, you will only puff yourself up to the detriment of the body.

What does Paul mean by the phrase, “each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned”? Commentators are all over the place on its meaning, so we should walk with caution. Here is my take. Paul sees faith as the power source of the Christian life. As Christians we do not possess innate strength. We live by faith. And our faith can be strengthened or weakened. We usually think of our faith as what we contribute, but Paul sees faith itself as a gift of God.

Ephesians 2:8 ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,

Your ability to exercise your specific giftedness in the Church is relative to the strength of your faith. Some people have a stronger faith than others in the Church. People may see the strength of their faith and attribute to them greatness. But Paul even sees the strength of their faith as having been assigned by God’s grace.

God is the author and finisher of our faith. If our faith is strong, it is strong because of God’s gracious working in our hearts. And here is the application to which Paul is driving. God has not made you strong so that you can feel superior to the weaker believer. God has strengthened your faith to be an encouragement to those who are weaker in the faith. Of course, we are all responsible to seek to grow in faith.

Ultimately, there is no place for pride in the body of Christ. Once you begin to think more highly of yourself, you begin to show disdain for the rest of the body of Christ. Instead of humbly recognizing that your relative strength has been given to you for the benefit of the body, in pride you will begin to criticize the other members of the body that are not as strong as you.

What if the muscle of your heart began to look at the rest of the muscles of the body? What if he started comparing himself and thinking, “What is up with all of these other muscles? I pump blood every minute of every day. I never get a break. Sometimes I work extra hard. But even when the rest of the body is resting, I am still pumping. Those other muscles work for an hour and they complain of being tired. Bunch of wooses.”

Or what if the thigh muscle started comparing itself to the muscles in the fingers? I can tote the whole body around for hours on end. What can those puny little fingers do?

But God has not designed the fingers to be as strong as the thighs. Instead, he designed them differently so that they could function differently.

It is a problem when people think more highly of themselves than they ought. But the opposite is also a problem. When someone does not see the value in themselves to the body as a whole. The particular combination of gifts and abilities and skills and weaknesses of every member of the body are not accidental. God does not have useless members of his body. We all have some part in God's grand scheme.

How many times do we fail to realize the importance of a member of our own body until something happens and it fails to function properly? I did not realize the importance of cartilage in my knee until I tore a chunk of it out. And then I realized its importance.

Every Christian is a member of the body of Christ. Jesus has distributed grace to each one as he intended. He has not given any member so much grace that they no longer need the other members. Only as the members work together does the body accomplish the works that Jesus intends.

Calvin understood this beautifully:
"Everyone desires to have so much (grace/giftedness) himself, so as not to need any help from others; but the bond of mutual communication is this, that no one has sufficient for himself, but is constrained to borrow from others. I admit then that the society of the godly cannot exist, except when each one is content with his own measure, and imparts to others the gifts which he has received, and allows himself by turns to be assisted by the gifts of others." Calvin

To think of yourself soberly is to recognize that when you possess faith and gifts, they are for the benefit of the entire body. And when your faith is weak, or you lack gifts, you ought to be willing to receive help from other members of the body. The truth is that we cannot even exercise our own gifts except in the context of the whole body. Our gifts are useless without the whole body. As important as the heart may be, without the rest of the body, it would be rather useless would it not?

"Since no part of the body still functions if severed from the whole, each Christian believer is useless if not an active part of the body. For Paul, there is no such thing as a Christian who is not also a member of the body (the church). The application from this is obvious. While we are personally justified by grace alone through faith alone on account

of Christ alone, we are not justified in isolation from other members of Christ's church. We are called from death to life to be part of a larger body—Christ's. We cannot exist independently of that body. Each member contributes something vital—even if it appears to be insignificant. Each member belongs to whole and is equally important to the well-being of Christ's church. Riddleberger

Are you thinking of yourself soberly? Are you thinking about the other members of the Church soberly? Paul now fleshes out a few of the many gifts Christ distributes to his Church.

4 For as in one body we have many members,
and the members do not all have the same function,
5 so we, though many,
are one body in Christ,
and
individually members one of another.
6 Having gifts that differ
according to the grace given to us,
let us use them:
if prophecy,
in proportion to our faith;

In creation, God has designed each of us uniquely. And, in re-creation, God has assigned to each of us a specific set of gifts. And with those gifts come specific functions within the body of Christ. God does not intend that we all look the same, or that we do the same things.

Some members of the church at Rome must have had the gift of prophecy. There were other miraculous gifts given present during the Apostolic era: healing, tongues, interpretation of tongues, and miracles. Of these miraculous gifts, Paul only mentions the prophet. It is possible that the other miraculous gifts were not in use at this time in the Church at Rome.

The prophet had received a wonderful supernatural gift. It would have been easy for the one so gifted to be puffed up. The biblical prophet received direct revelation from God. Sometimes the revelation would be in the form of direct exhortation. Sometimes the revelation would prepare the Church for some future event, like the famine that would sweep through the world, and through Jerusalem, in the first century.

In Paul's list of gifts in I Corinthians 12, the office of Prophet comes immediately after that of the Apostle.

1 Corinthians 12:28 ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.

If you were a Prophet, you would have rightly been held in high regard in the congregation. That is why it is so important for them to think of themselves soberly. If this is true of such an important gift as the prophet, then it is true for all of us.

In the Reformed Faith, we believe that the office of prophet has ceased since the completion of the NT Scriptures. There is much that I could say about this, but it will have to wait for another day. Feel free to ask me about this if you want.

But even if we have no Prophets in our congregation, the principle of thinking of ourselves soberly applies. In the Presbyterian Church we hold the office of elder in high esteem. So, it is very applicable for every elder to think of themselves soberly. And the elder must not think of himself as separate and distinct from the other members of the body. We are all members of one another.

so we, though many,
are one body in Christ,
and
individually members one of another.

The elder has a distinct function, but he is not distinct from the rest of the body. He is interdependent with her.

Every member of the Church is called to use the gifts that God has given to them.

Paul says simply, "Let us use them." God does not give us gifts to be stored away.

Not too long ago, my dad bought me a new chainsaw. Every time I pull it out and use it, I picture a smile on my dad's face. He gave me the saw and finds pleasure when I put it to use. God is the same way. He has given to each one of us gifts. And he is pleased when we use these gifts in the Church.

We are to use our gifts "in proportion to our faith." This phrase may be a sort of repetition of "according to the measure of faith assigned" in verse 3. But it is also possible that it might mean, "in accordance with the faith."

As a pastor, I am called to preach the Word of God. I am not called to preach innovative ideas. The Word of God, and the doctrines of the Westminster Confession of Faith, limit what I can say. I am to exercise my gift of speaking “according to the standard of faith.”

Maybe you have the gift of music or poetry. There are a variety of ways that you could use these gifts in the Church. But one way might be to write songs to be used in worship. As you write a song, it must be regulated by the standard of faith. In other words, it must be in accord with the standard of the truth. And the elders are responsible to ensure that what we sing accords with truth.

There is enough ambiguity in what Paul writes that either interpretation makes good sense. And really, Scripture teaches both principles. So, when it comes to using your gifts in the Church, you need humility. And you need faith. And you need to remember the standard of faith that has been given to us.

In verses 7-8, Paul lists six more gifts. The first is the gift of service:

7 if service,
in our serving;

If your gift is serving, be active in serving. Every Christian is called to serve. Service is a Christian virtue.

But Paul helps us to see that some Christians excel in service over other Christians.

The Greek word for “service” is *diaconia*. This is the word we translate “deacon” or “ministry”. And although many who have the gift of service will become Deacons, it is not necessary to hold the office of deacon to use this gift.

The gift of service is the ability to see things that need doing and go about doing them. This gift can be exercised both relationally and organizationally. In other words, you might find ways to individually serve another member of the body of Christ, or you might find ways to serve the organization of the Church. Both are necessary. Both are vitally important.

In order to serve relationally, you need to get to know the other members of the congregation. You need to rub shoulders with them. And in order to serve organizationally, you need to familiarize yourself with the organization of the Church to learn the needs of the Church.

Either way, Paul calls on those who have the gift of service to get about serving.

A word of caution here: to those of you who have this gift and have been serving, it is not your place to fix everything that needs doing in the Church. This is probably the best way to apply the lesson of Martha. She was serving so much that she did not have time to sit at the feet of Jesus. Service is not a substitute for devotion to Christ. Some who have the gift of service, need to hear the importance of resting from their service. Some who are active in serving try to mobilize others to serve with them. They soon discover that not everyone shares their vision or is willing to pitch in. They get frustrated and discouraged.

Those who have the gift of service who seek to open new ministries will be met with many obstacles. Patience, persistence, and humility are necessary. But what a blessing to a congregation when there are some who make it their business to serve to make the visions of others come to be. These people are truly precious to a congregation.

Has God given you the ability to see things that need doing? Make it your determination to put your gift into action. Serve the Church and serve the members of the Church.

The second gift is that of teaching.

the one who teaches,
in his teaching;

Not everyone is called to be a teacher. Teachers are held to a higher standard for one. And the possibility of teaching falsehood to a congregation should evoke fear in our hearts. That being said, when God apportions to you the ability to teach, you are to be teaching. This is not to say that everyone who has this gift has to become a preacher. Nor is it to say that you must have some formal class to teach in the Church.

The gift of teaching is given to both men and women. Some of the most gifted teachers I have ever known have been women. Still, whether or man or a woman has this gift, it must be exercised in accordance with the needs of the congregation and the standard of the faith.

A woman who has the gift of teaching has the limitation of not using her gift in such a way so as to teach authoritatively over the men in the congregation. This is the best way to take Paul's exhortation in 1 Timothy.

ESV 1 Timothy 2:12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.

It is not that a woman should never speak. The limitation is to not teach in such a way that the authority of men is ignored or rejected.

Whether you are a man or a woman, if you have the gift of teaching, look for ways to exercise your gift. It is possible to exercise your gift by taking a new member of the congregation under your wing and helping them to understand the Reformed Faith better.

God used one man coming to my home every week for an hour over a 10 month period to bring me to the Reformed Faith. He made good use of his gift of teaching.

It is possible to use your gift in small groups. Maybe you can teach a study that meets some particular need in the congregation. Talk to the elders to get their input as to your ideas. But don't assume that you cannot try something new.

There is always a need to help with teaching our youth. Sunday School teachers are always needed. Ideally, we would have two teachers for every class.

Maybe starting a catechism program is too ambitious. But you could ask a mom what she is doing with her children and come alongside her. We are living in a day when our public schools are eroding. That means that we must look for creative ways to teach our kids outside of the public-school context. I say this recognizing the great service of our public-school teachers.

God does not give the gift of teaching to be used independently of the authorities of the Church. But he does want those who are so gifted to find ways to serve the Church with their gift. And, for those who are called to the formal office of teaching, we are to take very seriously our calling. And we must not allow other aspects of the ministry to supersede or replace our duty to serve the church as teachers.

R.C. Sproul speaks more strongly than I might. But his words are a healthy corrective to the way in which pastors, who are teachers, are expected to do far more than teach. "We need a reformation in the church in terms of what is expected from ministers. The primary task of the minister is the preaching of the Word of God, the feeding of the flock. I tell young pastors that 90 percent of their time should be taken up with preaching and teaching. God has not called them to be psychological counselors or brilliant administrators. He has called them to preach the Word of God and feed the sheep. The pastor should be free to spend his time preaching and teaching, because what Christians need above all is to be nurtured in the Word of God." Sproul

I personally find that the other responsibilities of the ministry, like counseling, work to make me a better preacher. But Mr. Sproul is certainly right in calling the Church to rethink what she needs from her ministers. Preachers are not called to fulfill all the functions of the body. They are called to exercise their particular gift of teaching.

The third gift is that of exhortation.

⁸ the one who exhorts,
in his exhortation;

The Greek word here is *parakaleo*. We have seen it before. It means to come alongside to comfort, to encourage, to exhort.

The journey of the Christian life is long and difficult. The road to sanctification is full of potholes. The hardening of the heart through the deceitfulness of sin is a very real danger. Christians struggle against foes both within and without. Weariness and discouragement may settle in. Into this war zone, God provides this gift of encouragement. Those who possess this gift embody Paul's word in I Thessalonians 5:14.

1 Thessalonians 5:14 ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.

Sometimes people need a firm admonishment. Oftentimes, people need encouragement. What people do not need is criticism. Criticism exposes the weaknesses and faults of others without empathy and without any motivation of love that seeks to help the other person to overcome and persevere.

When you have a muscle that is not working properly, you look for ways to restore that muscle to health. Even when the problem is chronic, you are always trying to get the best function possible from it. You do not criticize yourself. In the Church, the one who criticizes fails to recognize that the very ones that he criticizes are members of his own body.

The encourager takes the time to listen. The encourager is not quick to draw conclusions but strives to better understand the bigger picture of the struggles of others. The encourager does not stand over others to condemn them. The encourager stands beside others and walks with them. The encourager does not shy from speaking difficult truth but always with an attitude of personal humility. The encourager finds beauty and potential where others find only wreckage. The encourager is more than optimistic. The encourager understands the promise of God to form Christ in all his children and wants to be a part of that work.

Today's Church is desperately in need of encouragers. Be thankful for the encouragers around you. And remember, even encouragers may become discouraged. There are times when the encourager needs encouragement.

The fourth gift is that of giving.

the one who contributes,
in generosity;

The gift of giving – sounds like a Hallmark Card. Every Christian is called to look for opportunities to give and to be generous in giving. But some excel more than others. And this is due to the gift of God's grace. You do not have to have lots of money or resources to have this gift. It is an attitude. And there are many ways to give that do not involve money. Maybe the most obvious is time. When a church has individuals who are generous with their time for the benefit of others in the body of Christ, it is a blessed place to be.

Those who possess the gift of giving are often are very disciplined and frugal themselves. They live simply not to hoard what they have, but to maximize their ability to give to others. They give without strings attached. They are not looking for something in return. And they don't try to give as little as possible but find ways to go above and beyond in their giving.

But even the giver may become discouraged in their giving. People are not always thankful. When Jesus healed the 10 lepers only one returned to say thanks. What is given can be wasted, or even abused. Givers can themselves be overwhelmed with life.

Paul encourages the giver to keep on giving, to not lose their generous heart, to persevere in exercising their gift.

The fifth gift is that of leading.

the one who leads,
with zeal;

Too many cooks in the kitchen spoil the stew. Not everyone is called to lead. But God gifts his Church with leaders. A leader is someone who is out in front. A leader must be willing to stand alone. They do not simply follow the crowd. But neither is a leader a lone wolf. Even leaders must work together with other leaders.

A leader gives direction. A leader sets the pace. A leader rules over others.

But more than simple oversight, a leader must lovingly care for those whom he leads. Jesus is the perfect model of a leader. He combines the qualities of Shepherd and Lord and King and Servant.

A leader must embrace responsibility, and bearing the burden of continued responsibility can weigh even the best leader down. Leaders receive more criticism than those who sit on the sidelines. Leaders can be discouraged and doubt their ability to lead. And leaders can use their position for selfish gain.

Paul encourages those who lead to do so with zeal. The Greek word is “spoude”. It often has the meaning of haste or urgency. But Paul seems to use it to mean “earnestness” or “diligence”. He reminds those with the gift of leadership to remember the value of whom they lead. They are leading the Bride of Christ. They must strive to overcome the tendency to walk away from responsibility. They must be actively engaged in leading.

I was recently watching a football game and I was reminded of how difficult it is to be a professional quarterback. The quarterback must have athletic ability. He must also have great intellect to read defenses. And he must be able to make split second decisions. But what makes a great quarterback is that he is a leader. And he must be a leader when all hope seems lost. And even after he has missed a wide-open receiver and surely feels terrible about himself, he must immediately get back in the huddle and lead the other ten men in the next play.

Paul exhorts leaders to stay in the game. He understands the tendency to want out. There are pressures that leaders bear that drain the soul. And there is something to be said for shared leadership. Moses needed the 70 elders to bear some of the responsibility, not to mention Aaron.

Leaders must always remember that they did not make themselves leaders. God has graciously gifted them to serve in this way. They are not inherently better than followers. They have simply been chosen by God to fulfill an important function in the body.

I think it is worth saying that the gift of leadership is not given all at once. An individual may grow and develop in leading. If you are young and wondering if God may be gifting you in the area of leadership, learn to be faithful in the small things. Take charge of some small task in the church.

The sixth and final gift in this list is that of showing mercy.

the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

What is the gift of mercy? It is the gift of doing those tasks that no one else wants to do. Providing for the poor, visiting and caring for the sick and elderly and disabled, helping those caught up in sinful lifestyles...

The one who has been given this gift simply has a bigger heart than most. When someone is unable to care for themselves, it can get messy – literally and figuratively. This gift requires kindness, gentleness, compassion, empathy, and patience.

Those who have this gift are often painfully aware of their own failures. They have experienced mercy in personal ways from the Lord and other believers. They understand the power of mercy to change a person's heart.

Those who have the gift of mercy are also the prayer warriors in the congregation. Prayer is another expression of compassion for those around them in need. Paul encourages those with this gift to show mercy cheerfully.

Maybe more than any other active service in the congregation, this one receives the least reward. The one who shows mercy does so in terrible situations where fixing the problem may not even be feasible. Those who are active in doing mercy live with frustration. They vicariously identify with and consciously bear the pain and distress of others.

The overwhelming nature of the ugliness of people's problems can overwhelm even the most compassionate. The one with this gift has a burden to show mercy, but over time, the joy can be lost.

Only as one continues to keep their eyes fixed upon Jesus, will they have their own tanks refreshed such that they can continue to serve with joy. The joy in showing mercy flows from the fellowship that one has with the heart of God – who Himself is the God of mercy.

The joy in showing mercy is not found in fixing the problem. The joy is found in knowing that the compassion that is flowing through you comes from the heart of God.

Summary:

1. If you are baptized into Christ, then you are a member of his body.
2. God bestows gifts to the members of His body to be used for the body.
3. We must learn to think soberly of ourselves and our giftedness.
4. When we criticize other members, we are criticizing other members of the same body, the body of Christ.
5. We all need encouragement to continue using our gifts.

The Church will never function to its full capacity this side of glory. To the world we will look like a severely disabled person. But do not evaluate the Church with the eyes of the world. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. See the Church through the eyes of Christ. She is His body. And she is where the fullness of Christ is found in this world.

Amen.