

The Church Is A Body

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[0 : 0 0] Well, in our evening services we are doing a short series called Pick Church of the Church and so we are looking at five of the images that the New Testament gives us to describe the Church of Jesus Christ. There's lots of different images that the New Testament uses to describe the Church. We're just picking out five of them. We've looked at the Church as a pillar, as a pillar and buttress of truth, a place that shows us what is true and a place that should really testify to that truth in every aspect of its life. We looked at the Church as a farm. We thought about how Paul likes, you know, I planted a polished wall, God gives the growth, that image of a farm is a wonderful example of the kind of mission work that we should be involved in, diligently sowing the seed, patiently waiting for a harvest.

Tonight we're looking at the third image in our list, the Church as a body and we're going to read again from Colossians chapter 1 verses 15 to 18. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities, all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things that in him all things hold together, and he is the head of the body, the Church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. This is one of several passages in the New Testament that speak of the Church as a body and so that image is being used to describe the nature and functioning of the Church and so it's a very powerful image but it's also a very simple one.

You just have to look at your own body and think, this is teaching me about what the Church of Jesus Christ is like and so there's so much that we could learn here and as is the case every week, we'll only just scratch the surface. But I want us to use this image to explore two things. We're going to talk about the importance of each part and we're going to talk about the unity of the whole because these are the two things I think that really lie at the heart of this image. So first of all the importance of each part. We'll dip into various passages across the New Testament in order to see how this image is used but the basic idea of the body image is that it's highlighting the fact that each member of the Church makes an important contribution. Just like in your own body, the many different parts all make an important contribution. I want us to just note four things very briefly. Number one, individuality. So one of the great truths emphasised by this body imagery is that as individual members of the Church, we're actually very different. Now it's important to remember that in terms of what we believe, we are all meant to be the same. Paul speaks about that in the passage that we read. He talks about not shifting from the Gospel that you heard. What we believe about God, what we believe about ethics, what we believe about sin must all be the same. We must never ever turn away to a different Gospel but in terms of what we can contribute to the Church, we are meant to be different. Each part can make a unique contribution.

And there's two dangers that can easily arise here for all of us. First of all as individuals, it's very easy to look at other people and to think, I'm not like them, so I don't belong. We can think ourselves, you know, I'm not confident like they are. I'm not good looking like that person. I'm not as successful in my job. I'm not married. I don't have children. I'm not musical.

I'm not funny. I'm not cool. It's so easy to think like that but none of that for one second means that you are not a crucial, precious, brilliant part of this Church. Paul uses the body image to make it absolutely clear that differences do not diminish or devalue our status as part of Christ's Church. We see that in 1 Corinthians 12. He says, if the food should say because I'm not a hand, I don't belong to the body, would that make it any less part of the body? And if the ear should say because I'm not an eye, I do not belong to the body, that would not make it any less part of the body. In other words, if you're united to Jesus Christ by trusting in Him, then it is theologically impossible for you to be less a part of the body of Christ than anyone else.

[5 : 30] Sometimes we can think to ourselves, you know, they're kind of the big, big name Christians. They're more part of the body than I am. And so, you know, you think, well, you know, obviously, they're much closer to God, they're much better than we are. And sometimes it could be people that we've known or sometimes it could be famous people. We think, you know, they're, they're obviously kind of at a different level to we are. Not true. It's not true. Here's a list of some famous names. The Apostle Paul, St. Augustine, John Calvin, John Bunyan, Thomas Chalmers, Tim Keller, all world famous Christians. They are all part of the body to exactly the same level as the person in the blank space. Who goes in the blank space? You. We're all part of the body together. So it's easy to sort of look at others and think, well, I'm not like them, I don't belong, but we can do the opposite thing as well. When as a group, we can see people and think, well, they are not like us. So they don't belong. They're different. And so it can easily happen.

Somebody could come into a congregation or somebody could be part of another congregation, or even there can be an entire congregation that do things very differently to us. And our instinctive reaction can sometimes be, well, they're different, so they don't belong. They're too different. But unless they believe a different gospel, unless they believe a different gospel, then otherwise, we've got to acknowledge that it's totally wrong for us to think we don't belong together. If it's a different gospel, they believe then yes, that's a different thing altogether.

But if they believe the same gospel, even if they're very different to us, then we belong together. And it's reminding us that we must never ever think that certain types of people don't belong in church. It's really easy to fall into that trap of, you know, sometimes people whose face don't look quite fit or whatever. It's so easy to think like that. So easy to think, you know, that somebody might be problematic or difficult or awkward. We must never ever think like that.

Paul is reminding us of that so clearly when he speaks about this verses that I thought were still up there, but they're not. That's okay. When he talks about the hand and the foot and all that kind of stuff. We are all here as individuals. And in terms of that individuality, we've all got one thing in common. We're all broken. But the biblical truth is that underneath that brokenness in each of us is someone who's incredibly precious, special, and useful. We're all part of the church as individuals. So individuality is the first thing I want to highlight. The second thing I want to highlight is capability. So the image of the body that Paul uses, as you can see in verse 17 of 1 Corinthians chapter 12, is very functional. So he talks very functionally. He says, you know, if the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? And this principle is tied to the teaching that the New Testament gives in regard to spiritual gifts. It's highlighted in the fact that we all have certain capabilities. Romans 12 speaks about that as one body where many members and as many members do not have the same function. So we, though many are one body in Christ and individually members of one another, having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them. It's a great reminder that although no one has every spiritual gift, everyone has got some. It means that no matter who you are as a Christian, no matter how weak or useless you feel, no matter how many times you might feel you've tried to do stuff and not done it particularly well, no matter how many times you feel like you can't do it, it is a theological fact that you have got gifts that God can use for his glory in the church as a theological fact. And that means that the stumbling block is not that you don't have gifts. The stumbling block is so often that we just feel like we can't use them or we're struggling with fear. Sometimes it can be because of a lack of confidence, sometimes it's because we're too busy, sometimes it's because we're not given the opportunities and that can easily happen in a church when things aren't delegated in a proper way. Whatever the reason, this is a great example of why our theology must always shape our thinking.

[10 : 26] So in terms of serving or doing something in the church, your thoughts might say to you, your feelings might say to you, I can't, your schedule might say to you, I can't, even other people might say to you, you can't. God says you can.

That doesn't mean that we can do anything. We all have certain gifts and we all don't have certain gifts. But you must never ever think that you're not capable or that you're useless. You are part of Christ's body and you've been equipped by him to perform key functions. That is so exciting. We all have capability as part of his body. So individuals, we're all here as individuals are different. Capability, we all have capabilities. Third thing is compatibility. The body imagery is also found in Ephesians 4 and here Paul's highlights something really interesting. He says he talks about the fact that each part fits together. So speaking of the truth in love, we're to grow up in every way into him

who is the head into Christ, from him the whole body joined and held together by every joint of which it equips, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. That is such a cool verse. It's a great reminder of the compatibility of each part. And the key point that we have to notice here is that the differences that we all have in our congregations, the differences that we all have in terms of our personalities, our gifts, our backgrounds and our capabilities, they don't make us incompatible. It's these differences that actually make us compatible.

And that makes perfect sense when you think of the body language. Each part fits together. And as it does so, the whole body works. So my hands can grab, my nose can smell, my ears can hear, my heart can pump, my legs can run. Well, I used to be able to when I was younger anyway. My kidneys can clean, my stomach can digest, it can all do different stuff. That means that as Christians, we as individuals might have two, three or four particular capabilities together. We have hundreds when you bring it all together. And that is brilliant because it's reminding us that if you're confronted by something as a Christian in terms of serving God, we think, I really can't do this. Whether that's maybe, you know, you come across a young believer who needs to be disciplined, or maybe there's some money that needs to be accounted and dealt with. Maybe there's a song that needs to be learned. Maybe there's a question that needs to be answered. And you might find yourself, I think I actually can't do this. Well, if that's the case, then you can go to the church and find someone who can. And that's what's so brilliant about being in a church is that we can work together and help one another. So often we are confronted by situations where we think, well, I can't do it. And maybe there are times when we actually can't. But the answer to that situation is to go straight to the church and to find a brother, who's sister or sister, who can. That's why it's so important to always look for the best in one another. We can go to

[13:58] Philippians to see that. Paul speaks about not doing anything about selfish ambition or conceit, but his humility, counting others more significant than yourselves. That's such a crucial part of being in a church family. And yet so often, instead of doing that, we focus on each other's weaknesses and failings. But if we do that, we are going to miss so much potential in the church of Jesus Christ. When you look at others, especially when you look at people who've maybe disappointed you or frustrated you, instead of dwelling what's wrong with them, ask yourself the question, what are they brilliant at? What is brilliant about this person?

So there's individuality, there's capability, there's compatibility, and the fourth thing is dependence. All of these points mean that as members of the body, we are dependent on one another. Paul makes that brilliantly clear in 1 Corinthians 12. He says, the I cannot say to the hand, I don't need you. Nor again, the head to the feet, I have no need of you. And that is such, that's reminding us of two massively important truths that I want you to think about in terms of the church and in terms of your relationship to the church. One, you are always needed in the church.

We need you and dozens more. You're always needed. But secondly, you are always needing the church as a Christian. Needed and needing. These are two theological facts that we must never forget. And it's a great reminder that Christianity, through Christianity, when we understand it, will simultaneously humble you like nothing else and yet at the same time show you how incredibly precious you are. And so this picture of the church as a body is teaching us about the importance of each part as individuals in terms of our capability, our compatibility, and our dependence on one another. I just think that that's such an important thing for you all to remember.

You know, so many people in the world are trying to look, trying to find something that will make them feel special. You know, you want to be kind of valued at work, you want to achieve something in your community, you want to be how plenty likes on Facebook or whatever it is you may be. The whole world around us is crying out to feel special on nothing compares to the value that God places on your membership of the church. You're such a crucial part of his body. So the importance of each part is the first thing. But the second thing is the unity of the whole. So you can look at your body, you can see loads of different parts, hands, arms, legs, feet, everything.

But it's still one body. And that's a great reminder that the church of Jesus Christ, although it has many parts, it's still and always will be a single united body. There is only one church. And that unity of the whole has got two important implications that I want us just to think about. What I want to say first of all is that just like your body, in terms of the church, the health of a part affects the health of the whole. So that's true in our own bodies. So it only takes one part of us to be injured or to be infected for our whole bodies to be affected by that. So a footbully with a broken toe is still an

injured footbally and they can't play. The health of that one part affects the whole. And that is teaching us a really important lesson as Christians.

[18 : 30] It's teaching us that when you are a casual about your own health as a Christian, you're also hurting others. And we face a huge danger in the church in 21st century Scotland today because we are kind of living at the end, but not the end, but just kind of off the back of nearly a hundred years of individualism. So the come, the culture around us is incredibly individualistic and I don't need to persuade any of you all that you all know that it's true.

And there's a huge danger that we can think that that individualism applies to us as Christians. So what happens is we think to ourselves, well, if I compromise on things, it's only going to affect me. It's just me and God and if I'm just going to kind of, I'm just going to cool it a wee bit with my Christian walk and it's only going to affect me. That is not true. The body image reminds us that that's never true. If I am casual about my spiritual health, it will not simply affect me. It will hurt other people. And the reason for that is because sin is never individualistic. Now that's a truth that we really need to write into our hearts. Sin is never individualistic. So yes, sin is very often selfish, but sin is not individualistic because sin will not just hurt you.

It will harm other people as well. It's one of the things that makes sin so hideous. It pulls people in. That's why people suffer because of stuff they've never done and yet it ruins their lives because sin just loves to destroy. And that's why people who've done nothing to deserve it end up suffering so much. Sin is never individualistic and that has a big warning for us in terms of how we conduct ourselves week to week as disciples of Jesus. So you might go to work and you might be harsh and aggressive and difficult. And your colleagues might think, well, they think we're to church. They say they're a Christian, but they're being horrible. Why would I want to be part of that?

Your sin is just hard then. You might go out and, you know, have too much to drink. Now, I'm not saying that we should all be tea total and I will gladly have a beer when I'm watching the football, but I've never been drunk in my life and never intend to be.

[21 : 46] But you know, we could also easily go and do that, drink too much and somebody might think, well, that's obviously perfectly okay. You might stop coming to church so often and think, well, it only affects me, but there might be somebody who's thinking, why don't they come and I've lost their friendship. I long to see them and yet they're never here. And it's the same with a whole host of others. When we gossip, when we're impatient, when we're critical, when we're jealous, all of these things are hurting other people. My health affects the health of the whole.

Now, I'm really conscious that when I say all that, it can sound like I'm kind of hammering everybody and I'm not trying to do that and I'm not trying to sound all depressing and harsh. It's just so important to remember that sin is never individualistic. And maybe by remembering that, it'll be the very thing that'll help us to say no to temptation. So it's the case that when you're casual about your own health, you hurt others. But at the same time, and the other thing I want to emphasize is that when we mistreat others, we risk hurting ourselves.

And the unity of the church body means that if we do behave in an inappropriate way towards one another, we're actually going to hurt ourselves in the process. And a clear example of this is when church discipline is handled badly. So church discipline is a crucial part of the life of the church. It's something that identifies the church. And it's crucial, you know, what it means is that, you know, as elders, we don't just think ourselves, well, we just don't care what people do. We actually want to make sure that we look after the flock that God has placed under our care. It's a crucial part of how the church is to function. And so it's reminding us that in the church body, sometimes people make mistakes. Sometimes people make huge mistakes. But when that happens, it's vital that we respond to that in a biblical way. Often though, we respond in a worldly way. And the worldly way to respond to mistakes is to forget grace and focus on punishment. So people get criticized, ostracized, gossiped about, and often condemned for their failings. And the end result is that the people who actually do the disciplining can end up hurting themselves because if we're harsh and judgmental and cold and cruel, and if we just keep people who are broken at arm's length, then it will not be long before people look at us and ask the question, why are you so different from Jesus? And the confidence and trust and respect that people have for us will be lost. Instead, our discipline must always be with a view to restoration. We must always make sure that we nurture the broken parts of the body back to health. Now, Paul illustrates this very well in one of the trickiest verses in the New Testament that we're going to look at together right now in 1 Corinthians 12, 22 to 24, not an easy verse to understand, but Paul says, on the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be

weaker are indispensable. And on those parts of the body that we think less honour though, we bestow the greater honour. And our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require, but God has so composed the body giving greater honour to the part that lacked it.

Now, this is a bit of a tricky verse to understand, and it's a very unusual point that Paul is making, and that maybe a wee bit nervous in explaining it, and you may not necessarily agree with my interpretation, but here goes. So some parts of the body are used for going to the toilet.

And that's the parts of the body that Paul is talking about here. And so these are the parts of the body that do the kind of yuckiest aspects of body functioning. And yet these are the parts of the body that we treat with extra special care. So I don't mind if my hand or my arm is exposed, even on a warm summer day, I don't mind if my legs are exposed, and I'm wearing shorts, but I most definitely mind if other parts of my body are exposed. So the awkward, embarrassing, sensitive, yucky parts of the body, these are the ones that are actually given the greatest honour.

[27 : 06] And I think the point that Paul is making here is that if somebody in the church falls into a whole pile of muck, or awkwardness, or embarrassment, if they make a mistake that is inappropriate, and embarrassing, then we are to treat that part of the body with extra special care, until it's presentable again. In other words, we are to honour the un-presentable mucky part. Now that does not mean for one second, glorying in sin, absolutely not. What it means is dealing with sin and brokenness in a way that does not shame the person in the process. And that's because, this makes perfect sense, because it all makes sense. If a Christian badly mucks up, it's our body that's injured. You can't just detach yourselves and say, well, they're not part of us anymore, soon as they've made a massive mistake. Their brokenness is hurting our body. And that's why you look back through all of Reformed theology, the goal of discipline is always restoration, not ostracisation, restoration. And that makes perfect sense, because think about your hand.

If your hand was hurt for whatever reason, whether it was an accident, or whether it was neglected, or foolishness, or something stupid, whatever it was, if your hand is hurt, would you respond to that by being rough with your hand? Do you heal a cut by adding a bruise? No. If your hand is hurt, what do you do that you pull it right in and protect it and help it heal and learn from the mistake that was made? And it's a great reminder that we don't just need to watch how our actions affect our own health, we need to watch how our actions affect the health of others. That's why it's no surprise that later in Colossians, Paul says, put to death there for what's earthly in you, sexual devorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. And according to these, the wrath of God is coming. In these, you once walked when you were living in them, but now you must put them all away, anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.

All of these are means and methods of hurting ourselves and hurting other people. And instead, we should follow what he says in verse 12, put on then as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, uniqueness, and patience, bathing with one another. And if one is a complaint against one another, forgiving each other as the Lord is forgiving you, so you must also forgive. And above all of these things, put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony, let the peace of Christ ruling your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body and be thankful. We need to write these words in our heart because the health of a part affects the health of the whole.

But the other thing I just want to highlight briefly is that the experience of a part affects the experience of the whole. The body imagery is teaching us that we are united, so therefore the experience of each part should be shared. Paul gives two brilliant examples of that in 1 Corinthians 12. These are suffering and rejoicing. If one member suffers, all suffer together. If one member is honored, all rejoice together. It's a big reminder that as a church, we share sufferings and we share rejoicings. And yet we've got to ask ourselves, do we do either of those things?

Do we share our sufferings together? And do we share our joys together? Because all too often we don't suffer together. That's probably the one that we're more guilty of not doing.

[31 : 39] Often that's because we don't want to tell people that we're suffering. We don't want to show weaknesses to others. Sometimes we can be reluctant to involve ourselves in other people's mess, sometimes we don't want other people to kind of see the mistakes that we have made.

Instead, we just want to hide it. We don't want people to see the sin in their lives.

It's interesting, you know, often in terms of our own sin and failings, we hide it. And we want to pretend that it's not there. Often with other people's sin, we can't stop looking at it and we talk about

it. And yet that's the very opposite of what the New Testament tells us to do, because the New Testament says that in terms of our own sin, we should confess it and acknowledge it. When it comes to other people's sin, we should forgive it and forget it. But equally, often we don't rejoice together either. And so instead of the honouring of another part, giving us joy, it can make us feel insecure. It can make us feel jealous and defensive. And, you know, we can all fall into that trap. You know, sometimes you can hear of people, you know, even, and this is something that ministers struggle with, you know, you hear of other ministers and they've preached a sermon and loads of people have come to faith and it's been amazing and you kind of find yourself thinking, oh man, what's wrong with me? And all of that's the wrong kind of reaction because you're just jealous and selfish rather than in, rather than rejoicing in the fact that it's all something that we share in together. Often we can be a wee bit kind of, like, we can think a bit like in terms of football teams, you know, we think in terms of like, you know, different parts of the church, you know, one church has got this great thing going on or something else going on. Just as one football team's got a great player and then another team, well, they've got this new great player, they're winning, they're doing really well. And in football teams, it's all a competition. And we can easily think like that in terms of churches. And yet the image of the body is telling us that that is never true because every single new signing in the church, every single top scorer, every single brilliant talent that emerges, every single success is all for the one team. We're all rejoicing together. It's reminding us that as a united body, success, blessing and joy for one part is impossible to separate from the whole. And that's why if a church gets stronger in Carlyway or Cullinish or Castletown or Chile or China or whatever, then all of that means that theologically you are stronger too. And that is such good news as one united body, we suffer together and we rejoice together. So in terms of the unity of the body, we are reminded that the sufferings of one part is the same, the health of a part, sorry, affects the health of the whole. And the experience of a part affects the experience of the whole. But overall of that, there's one final thing I want to say in the last two minutes.

And that's that in all of these things, we're being reminded that we are connected to Jesus. That's the great truth that Colossians 1 makes, that Jesus is the head of the body. If you think about your own body, you're absolutely dependent on your head. We absolutely need our heads, our brains, our mouths in order to survive. The church is exactly the same. We're completely and totally dependent on him. He's the beginning, he's the life giver. He's the one who nourishes and energizes the church. He's the one on whom we are completely dependent for life. We can often think, you know, often people talk about churches and they say that, you know, that church is dead. And by it, they sometimes mean, well, it's not doing enough activities, it's not engaged with culture, the singing is not particularly good, the decor is old or whatever it may be. All of these things are important, but none of them are what makes a church dead. What makes a church dead is if it loses its connection to Jesus. And that union with Jesus means that when we talk about sharing joy and sharing suffering with one another, we also share that with Jesus. Now here's another interesting and maybe controversial question. Does Jesus suffer after the cross?

Does Jesus suffer after the cross? Our immediate answer is probably no. I think maybe the answer is yes, in a particular way. And I've seen that because of what Paul says in first, in clothist chapter one verse 24. He says, I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I'm filling up what is lacking in Christ's affliction for the sake of his body, that is the church. Now that does not mean for a second that Christ's suffering on the cross were inadequate. The cross is a finished, complete work. But what I think it does mean is that Christ, as the head of the church, suffers with the church. And I think Paul knew that this was through you, from the day he was converted. Because what did Jesus say to Paul on the road to Damascus?

[37 : 55] He said, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? And I think the reason for that is because the finishing line in God's plan of redemption isn't the cross, nor is it the resurrection, nor is it even the ascension. The finishing line for God's plan is when he is able to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before God. In other words, the finishing line for Jesus is when you are home with him forever. Right now he suffers with you, then he will rejoice over you.

Because that is Jesus' goal. That's why he came to die. That's why he came to give his life.

Because he wants you to be part of his body. And that's incredible because it means that you, that right now for Jesus, until the day that you are with him, something's missing.

That is how precious you are. That's how amazing it is to be part of his body. Jesus, you know, he's not calling you to just follow him. He's not calling you to just serve him.

He's not calling you to just be like him. He's actually calling you to say, I want you to be part of my body because you are so precious. And you know, it's a great reminder that nobody else can take your place in that body. No one can fit in a space that you're meant to go.

[40 : 24] So you are part of his body. You are so precious to him. And if anyone's not the other Christian, there's a space for you that no one else can fill.

Amen. Lord Jesus, we bow before you as the head of the body.

And we pray that that image of the body would shape the way we view ourselves and the way we view one another. We pray that we would remember the importance of each part.

And we pray that we will remember the unity of the whole. We pray that we would suffer together, rejoice together, and be more and more united together in you, our Savior, Lord Jesus.

Please bless us and bind us all closer to one another and to you we pray. Amen.