Body Parts
1 Corinthians 12:12-31
Small Group Guide

Opening Icebreaker Question:
- If you were a body part (i.e., a literal part of the human body) in the Christian Church Body, what would you be and why?

OPTIONAL BACKGROUND READING: Today we’ll be looking at the portion of 1 Corinthians 12, where Paul first described the people of Jesus as inter-connected members of one body. In this passage, Paul gives us a picture of how Jesus intends us to view ourselves, and it’s a picture that should shape everything about our shared life.

It seems that in the Corinthian church, they had become obsessed with the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues, or speaking in a language that they had not studied or learned. It may sound strange to us, but this gift had become for them a litmus test for whether you were truly in the elite spiritual club or not. Last week we saw how Paul said that true spirituality is found in any expression of the Holy Spirit that lifts up the name of Jesus and builds up others. It’s in this context that Paul gives this word picture of the Christian church as a human body, which was, at the time, totally revolutionary.

Read vv. 12-14.

1. What are the implications that, as Christians, we are a vital part of a living organism?

2. The word “one” is mentioned 6 times in these three verses, so one obvious theme is unity. From this passage, what do you think the Holy Spirit’s role is in fostering Christian unity?

3. “Many” is mentioned 3 times. What theme does this represent and how does this interact with the theme of unity?

READ 1 Corinthians 12:15-26, noticing how Paul personifies different parts of the human body, as if they could talk to one another.

4. From these two paragraphs what problems in the Corinthian church can you discern? Why would these issues be so divisive?

5. What specific challenge(s) do you find in this text to the prideful (those overvaluing their gifts)?

6. What specific encouragement(s) do you find to the insecure (those undervaluing their spiritual gifts)?

7. How do you think these issues apply most to our church setting?

8. How do you think this passage balances unity and diversity? 50/50%? 60/40%? 40/60%? Other? Why would some type of balance be important to the Christian Body?

9. In your Christian practice, do you value unity or diversity more? Why? Do you think you could be better balanced? How?

10. In vv 21-26 the parts of the Body that naturally receive more glory are supposed to honor those who don’t. What would that look like in real life?
READ 1 Corinthians 12:27-31

11. There seems to be an order and priority of gifts, which seems to contrast with the equality of the gifts explained in the previous passage. Do you remember how Josh accounted for this? Before looking at Addendum 1 that quotes Josh’s sermon, try to figure this out on your own.¹ You also may need to check out 1 Cor 14:1 and 14:39 for help.

12. How are the first three persons/gifts listed in this section the “bare essentials” for founding and building up churches? How are they, by definition, others-focused rather than individual-focused?

13. Josh insisted that to “desire the greater gifts” is to do all we can to see that these particular, foundational gifts are operating in our church body. Beyond exercising your unique gift, in light of 1 Cor 12:31, what is your part in helping your small group and this church thrive in this way?

14. **Share and Pray:** Among our prayer requests, let’s pray that we will grow in the unity (of purpose and relationship) and diversity (of gifts and calling) in the Body of Christ.

¹ Hint: Which of these gifts might be necessary for the start of a church or some ministry and why?
ADDENDUM 1 (Quoting Pastor Josh’s sermon, 5/15/16)

I don’t want you to miss the third challenge in this passage. We see it in the final section, 12:27-31:

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (In case you missed it, that he wasn’t just talking about the human body, Paul makes it clear: I’m talking about y’all. You are the body of Jesus). 28 And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? (These are rhetorical questions, and the implied answer is ‘no.’) 31 Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.

This seems to contradict everything we just read, about all the parts being of equal value and importance to the whole body. Here in v. 28, Paul seems to rank the spiritual gifts and the people who practice them in order of importance. Not only that, but in v. 31, he says, “Now eagerly desire the greater ones!” How can that be? Are some gifts in fact greater than others? What makes them so? There’s a tension here, isn’t there?

Before we try to resolve this, let’s clarify some of these terms, specifically in v. 28. Paul again gives a list of some gifts of the Spirit, much like we saw last week. NT scholars again think that for the most part, he’s just trying to give a diverse sampling of the gifts so that people will appreciate the diversity of this living organism, the church. We already defined most of these last week, but there are three that I want to be sure to mention today, and they’re the first three in the list: apostles, prophets, and teachers. These are not so much offices to be held, as they are ministries that various people, empowered by the Spirit, will practice.

- **Apostles**: There were 12 apostles initially—the men who ate with Jesus and watched his every move when he was on earth, and then saw him risen from the dead. Judas of course fell away and was replaced by Matthias, and then Paul got to be called one too because he saw Jesus on the Road to Damascus. In that sense of “Apostle,” there will be no more apostles. They were it. But I think what Paul is talking about here, in the apostolic gift or ministry, are people who are uniquely gifted to start new works for Jesus—who go into uncharted territory in our community and throughout the world to start new works for the gospel, and plant churches. They’re catalysts.

- Then there are **prophets**: remember from last week? People to whom the Holy Spirit gives messages for his people, to be intelligibly communicated, for the sake of building up and encouraging. People who will listen for God and humbly speak into people’s lives on his behalf.

- Third, he names **teachers**. These are people who have been uniquely gifted by the Spirit of God to methodically study the word of God, and present it to his people in a nourishing, compelling way, in a number of different settings.

Coming back to this tension, why are these three gifts ranked first? How could some be greater after what he’s just said about the value of every part of the body? What’s he talking about? Paul calls a few gifts “greater” because they’re the bare essentials for founding and building up the local church, the body of Jesus.

I want to point out that in v. 31, the verb Paul uses for “eagerly desire” is a 2nd-person plural command. “Zelao,” To be zealous for, or pursue earnestly. He’s not saying that each individual should strive to have each of these gifts. That would negate what he has already said. The fact that it’s plural means that he’s speaking to the community of believers: you all need to eagerly desire to have these gifts present and active in your church body. That’s a good start.
Now, any time we find a difficulty like this in Scripture, we should gradually widen our look at the surrounding context, to see if it helps to make sense of the problem. And as we do that here, we keep in mind what Paul has already said, that the HS determines who has what gift, and gives them as he sees fit. But we also notice as we go forward, that in ch. 13, Paul makes a long parenthetical remark, which Lou will speak about next week, and then he resumes this very train of thought from v. 31 in chapter 14:1: “Follow the way of love and eagerly desire (same word) gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy.”

Then we see it again at the end of ch. 14, v. 39: “Therefore, my brothers and sisters, be eager to (same word) prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues.” There’s a consistent theme here: your community should be eager to see certain gifts at work, especially prophecy—whose aim is to build up—and probably also the other two I mentioned a moment ago. Why? Because these are the gifts that are foundational for starting and nourishing, or building up the church body. By definition they exist to build up the people of Jesus.

Is every person, and every kind of gifting, necessary for the quality of life that Jesus wants to see in the organism that is his church? Yes! But if his body is going to carry out his work in the world, and if new churches will be started and nurtured where people can come to know him and experience his life-changing power, all of you need to make it your concern to pursue and develop these particular kinds of gifts in your midst—the ones that start new churches and then teach them and encourage them by speaking on behalf of God. That doesn’t mean that every one of you should be doing those things—but everyone of you should make it your concern to see that those people with those gifts are being discovered, and developed, and empowered to exercise those gifts.