

## SESSION FIVE: THE BODY OF CHRIST

### Opening Prayer

*Incarnate God, you loved humanity enough to take on a human body. We are now your body on earth. Show us how to live as your body in our own lives and in the ways we treat others. Amen.*

### Jumpstart

Close your eyes: What do you see when you hear the phrase: “the body of Christ”? What does that image say about the church? About us as Christians?

### One Body in Christ

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul talks about the Corinthian community as a body and introduces the metaphor of the body of Christ, an important part of the church’s identity yet today. There are two parts to this metaphor: First, Paul discusses the gifts that each person brings to the body, stressing the value of the individual members. Second, he describes how the parts of the body depend on one another and how each is crucial to the well being of the entire body. The image of the body of Christ implies both diversity and unity.

### It’s Greek to Me

**charisma** (*KAR-is-ma*) = a gift freely bestowed

Paul uses this word in Chapter 12 to talk about special gifts the Corinthians have received from God. The word is closely related to the Greek word *charis*, or grace, which Paul uses throughout the letter to refer to God’s gift of grace and his own feelings of gratitude.

### Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Paul writes here of the spiritual gifts Christians have received from God. These are not special talents the individual has cultivated and can boast about. Instead, these gifts are given by God to be used for the good of the church, not for personal triumph.

In defining the variety of gifts within the community, Paul stresses that these gifts come from one and the same God (vv. 4, 5, 6, 7, 11). All are given by God to be used for God’s glory. The term “spiritual gifts,” then, does not necessarily mean these gifts are spiritual in nature, but that they are from the Spirit. Paul lists several such gifts as examples (vv. 8-10):

- utterance of wisdom
- utterance of knowledge
- faith
- gifts of healing
- working of miracles
- prophecy
- discernment of spirits
- various kinds of tongues
- interpretation of tongues

Think of the gifts God has given you. Remember that naming our God-given gifts is not bragging but is necessary to be in full service to God’s church.

### Discussion Questions

? Do you identify with any of the spiritual gifts Paul mentions? Which ones do you find present in your own faith community? Which ones are missing?

? What are your own gifts? How have you identified those gifts? How do you use them to glorify God?

### Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-26

The second part of Paul's image of the body of Christ stresses the unity of the body. As we saw in Session One, it was common in the ancient world to compare society to a human body. Paul takes that image and applies it to the church, noting clearly in verses 12-13 that we are one body, baptized by the one Spirit, as sing each week in our closing song. He returns to the issue of diversity in verses 14-26, noting that all parts of the body are important, not in and of themselves, but for what they bring to the whole body. In fact, he writes, the parts that seem to be the weakest are indispensable (v. 22); the less honorable deserve the most honor; the less respectable, the most respect (v. 23). And the parts of the body are so interconnected that when one member suffers, the whole body does.

### Discussion Questions

- ? What parts of the body might Paul be referring to when he talks about the weaker members? The less respectable members? What people in the community could he be speaking about?
- ? What parts of the body can we not live without? In what ways are some members of a community more essential than others?

### Think About It

Two medieval mystics wrote about our individual identity as Christ's body, departing from Paul's emphasis on the corporate body. Read these silently and reflect on your body as Christ's body.

*"We awaken in Christ's body  
as Christ awakens our bodies,  
and my poor hand is Christ, He enters  
my foot, and is infinitely me.*

*I move my hand, and wonderfully  
my hand becomes Christ, becomes all  
of Him (for God is indivisibly  
whole, seamless in His Godhood).*

*I move my foot, and at once  
He appears like a flash of lightning.  
Do my words seem blasphemous?—  
Then open your heart to him*

*and let yourself receive the one  
who is opening to you so deeply.  
For if we genuinely love Him  
we wake up in Christ's body*

*where all our body, all over,  
every most hidden part of it,  
is realized in joy as Him  
and He makes us, utterly, real,*

*and everything that is hurt, everything  
that seemed to us dark, harsh,  
shameful, maimed, ugly, irreparably  
damaged, is in Him transformed*

*and recognized as whole, as lovely,  
and radiant in His light  
we awaken as the beloved  
in every last part of our body."*  
— Symeon the New Theologian<sup>1</sup>

*"Christ has no body now on earth  
but yours,  
no hands but yours,  
no feet but yours;  
yours are the eyes through which to look  
at Christ's compassion to the world,  
yours are the feet with which  
he is to go about doing good,  
and yours are the hands  
with which he is to bless us now."*  
— Teresa of Avila<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Jane Vennard: *Praying with Body and Soul: A Way to Intimacy with God*, pp. 120-21.

<sup>2</sup> From *The Doubleday Prayer Collection*, edited by Mary Batchelor, p. 269.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 12:27-31, 14:1-5**

After stressing the unity of the body and the significance of all its parts, Paul points out that some gifts are more important than others. In 12:28, he ranks gifts in the following order:

- apostles
- prophets
- teachers
- deeds of power
- gifts of healing
- forms of assistance
- forms of leadership
- various kinds of tongues

In chapter 14, Paul clearly states that prophecy is more important than speaking in tongues, a form of ecstatic utterance that is unintelligible to hearers. Since this letter deals with various conflicts among the Corinthians, Paul may be addressing a conflict over the relative value of these two gifts. The key for Paul is communication. Prophecy is more important because it addresses other people and builds up the church. Only God can understand those who speak in tongues, unless there is someone to translate for the rest of the community. You might want to read the rest of chapter 14, in which Paul elaborates on the distinction between these two gifts and compares speaking in tongues to playing an instrument without following any notes (v. 7).

### **Discussion Questions**

❓ Look at the way Paul ranks gifts in 12:28. How do you think we would prioritize these gifts in our churches today? Are there other gifts that are more important to the church now?

❓ What do you think of Paul's argument that prophecy is more important than speaking in tongues?

❓ How important is communication within the church? What problems do generational differences pose for the church today?

### **Exercise**

#### **Trust**

Acknowledging that we are all part of one body requires that we trust each other, just as you can usually trust your own body to do the things you need it to do. Try these two trust exercises.

#### **1. Trust Yourself**

Stand with your legs 2-3 feet apart (some may want to try this on their knees instead of standing). Extend your arms, shoulder height, straight out to each side. Turn your head to look at your right hand. Bend to the left at the waist, bending your left knee if necessary, and reach down to touch the ground with your left hand, while still looking at your right hand. If you aren't flexible enough to reach the floor, grab your ankle or your calf. Hold for 10-15 seconds then release.

#### **2. Trust Each Other**

Stand in a circle, with one member of the group in the center. With eyes closed and arms folded across his or her chest, the center person falls in one direction, trusting that the others will catch him or her. Let two or three people try this.

❓ How difficult was it for you to trust your own body? To trust each other? Which was harder for you?

### **What Does it Mean for Us?**

With our society's emphasis on individualism and distorted body images, it may be hard for us to understand the body of Christ image in the way the Corinthians did. We find it difficult to admit that we are dependent on others, so the idea of being members of one body runs counter to fundamental American values like independence and individuality. We see bodies and sexual imagery around us everyday, but we may have trouble loving our own bodies, which never seem as perfect as those we see in mass media. These ideas can be barriers to our ability to really accept and live out the belief that we are the body of Christ. With those barriers in mind, consider these questions together.

? Discuss some of the ways societies or churches are like a body. What are the positive aspects? The negative?

? How does the sacrament of the Eucharist support the notion of the church as the body of Christ?

? How do popular images of "perfect bodies" affect how we see ourselves as the body of Christ?

? Do all members of a human community contribute equally? Should people be valued based on what they contribute?

? Think about your own faith community, who is part of it and what is stressed in preaching and study groups. Which aspect of the body image seems more important in your church — diversity of gifts or unity in the Spirit? How can churches find a good balance between those two?

? How far does the body of Christ extend? To your local congregation? Your denomination? All Christians? All people? Does the image have a different meaning depending on how far you extend it?

### **Closing**

Close the group session with prayer for this time of study together, including any issues of praise or concern that group members want to share. Then sing together the first verse of "They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love."

We are one in the spirit,  
We are one in the Lord,  
We are one in the spirit,  
We are one in the Lord,  
And we pray that our unity  
May one day be restored.  
And they'll know we are Christians  
By our love, by our love,  
Yes they'll know we are Christians  
By our love