

**“Claiming Our Christian Identity:
As the Body of Christ”
I Corinthians 12:12-31a**

**February 4, 2001
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Once upon a time, a group of birds got together and attempted to build a church. But since they were not of all the same feather they had a hard time flocking together. You see, the starlings insisted on lots of education for their ever-growing population while the parrot thought it was well enough that they just have one room for dialogue. The wild geese thought they would like to stop by once in awhile but don't count on them for any contributions because they were just passing through on their way south. The canaries thought we ought to sing only the great anthems of the church while the hummingbirds thought we ought to sing those songs where everybody could hum along. The ducks saw a need for baptism by immersion while the owl said, "The only way I'm coming to this church is if you have night services!" The dove wanted to organize peace marches but the hawk was content with chicken suppers. Mr. Rooster was called to be the pastor. Bob White was elected as the treasurer. Mr. Chicken was selected as the chairman of the board. On the first Sunday of services there sat the raven in a pew saying, "Nevermore, nevermore."

How can you take a diverse group of opinionated people and bind them together in one body? Paul was confronted with that task in the metropolitan city of Corinth. In Chapter 12, he draws a brilliant picture of the church as the resurrected body of Jesus Christ. I want to land there today.

The parts are many. In verse 14 it says, the body does not consist of one member but many. Indeed it does. The human body is one living organism composed of a hundred trillion cells but through its DNA every cell of the body knows it belongs to you. Paul did not understand DNA, but he did know that humans were intricately and wonderfully made. Indeed we are complex combinations of skeletal

systems, nerve systems, digestive systems, and circulatory systems. Every part is critically important. Sometimes even the hidden parts are more vital than the visible parts. Take your hair for instance, if in fact, you have any. Look at the attention we give hair.

We cut it. We style it. We color it. We spray it. We even come to church and the pastor says, "The hairs on your head are numbered." Yet, I immediately gave up my hair a few years ago in favor of my spleen as I went through chemotherapy. The spleen was much more important than my hair. A friend of mine sent me a card during those days that said, "Howard, the best thing about being bald is that you never have to worry about a bad hair day."

On the day my mother was buried I got a splinter stuck in my big toe. Big toes do not amount to much in the light of death. Two weeks later, I stumbled into an urgent care treatment center seeking help for an infected toe. It suddenly got my attention. Now Paul, with this beautiful analogy, compares the body to the church. "Such is true with the body of Christ," he says. You may come here today feeling like eyes, ears and nose. Or you may be feeling like nothing more than the big toe, but you are dramatically important in the body of Christ.

An old Scottish minister dreamed he had died and gone to heaven.

As he approached the pearly gates, St. Peter asked him for his credentials. The minister described all the sermons he had preached. St. Peter immediately said, "Not a single person up here remembers one that you preached in all your years." He went on to describe all the calls he had made, all the community service he had delivered. All of it faded with the passing of time. Discouraged, he turned to walk away from the gate when St. Peter said, "Are you the man who used to feed the sparrows?" "Yes," replied the pastor. "Well," said St. Peter, "the Master of the sparrows wants to meet you and say thank you. Come right on in."

All parts are important and all parts are interdependent. And it is here that Paul's analogy gets amusing. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you." Nor again can the head say to the foot, "I don't need you any longer." After all, the head bone is connected to the neck bone and the neck bone is connected to the shoulder bone." Well, you know how the rest of it goes. My

goodness! The thought of a 230 lb., 6 ft. 2 in. eyeball standing here in this pulpit today would be ridiculous and useless. So the body, says Paul, is a unit and the parts have to work together. You see, community is essential in every context of life. We are not self-made people no matter how much we wish or like to think we might be.

David Bordis turned Ford parts manufacturing company from a 50 million dollar loss a year into a 175 million annual profit a year. He said, "The first thing I had to do was to get engineers and accountants and union and non-union factory workers to stop flinging accusations at each other and start solving problems together. I had to help them trust each other and once they could trust each other then they weren't worried about what somebody else was doing. They could just concentrate on their own job and the company could make money."

About twenty years or so ago, I went through a real tough board meeting one night. The next morning the lay financial secretary came to see me. I began my conversation with him by saying, "I think I'll just go out and start my own church." He didn't say anything. He sat down and listened awhile. He let me rant and rave about my struggles with our denomination. When I ran out of things to say, Russell stood up from his chair and said, "Well, I reckon I'll be going home now." He got to the door. Then he stopped and turned back. He said, "Howard, when you build your own church, I wouldn't build it very big if I were you."

The parts of the body are interrelated. They are connected one to the other and this is the point of this whole story. The body is one and this body is none other than the resurrected body of Jesus Christ. "Know you are the body of Christ and individually members of it," says Paul. Not *might be*, not *could be*, not *will be*, not *should be*, you *are* the body.

And when it comes to the heart of Christ, well, you're it. Jesus was clear about it. In John 15:12 Jesus says, "This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. You did not choose me, I have chosen you, so go out and bear much fruit."

A tiny Yugoslavian nun taught students at St. Mary's High school in India for twenty years. Then she caught this vision. Before anyone dies, they need to know they are loved. Before God had finished with Mother Theresa, the Missionaries of Charity numbered over three thousand in fifty-two countries around the world. I remember how the editorial cartoon said it in the local paper on her death, "Blessed are the poor, for they have seen Mother Theresa." When it comes to the heart of Christ, you are it! When it comes to the mind of Christ, you are it! Paul put it this way; "Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Some years ago, I was stuck in an airport in Baltimore trying to get home in a January snowstorm. The lines were long and people's patience had long since worn out. Some of them had been in that airport for 24 hours or longer. I happened to find a seat next to the ticket counter, and I noticed as people came to complain and sometimes to curse. The attendant at the counter handled each one with a kind of pleasantness and matter of fact-ness that I thought was astounding. When my plane finally got there, and I walked passed the counter to board, I noticed she had one of those WWJD bracelets on her wrist. Now don't wear one of those things unless you're going to practice it. I said to her before I could board the plane, "You know, you put what you wear on your arm in practice today as you interrelated with other people. Today you did what Jesus would do and I am so happy to see you practice it in your life." And she, a little embarrassed, turned to me and said, "Thank you, but I just try to do my job and I just try to do what I think Jesus would have me do everyday." When it comes to the mind of Christ, you're it!

When it comes to the hands of Christ, you're it. How is it we say, "Christ has no hands but our hands to do his work today. He has no feet but our feet to lead others in his way. We are the only Bible the careless world will read. We are the sinner's gospel, we are the scoffer's creed."

Out in South Dakota some years ago, a little boy got lost on the prairie. His parents couldn't find him. The state police came. The Boy Scouts came. The neighbors came and strangers came to

search for him. For three days, hundreds of people moved through the prairie hoping to find the boy. On the morning of the fourth day, one of the searchers said, "Why don't we get organized? Why don't we join hands in a long, long line and sweep over this field until we find this child?" So they formed a line a quarter of a mile long and they moved through the prairie holding hands. On the third sweep they found the boy lying dead in a small ditch behind a bush. They gently picked him up and took him to his grieving mother. In her despair, she raised her head and said to those who were searching, "Why didn't you join hands sooner?"

We are the body of Christ. Let us embody Him well, that the world may be saved.

Amen.