
The Fellowship of the King: The Means of Christian Community

1 Cor. 12:12-31

Mark Schindler

Series Introduction

This evening we begin a series of four messages that I have titled “The Fellowship of the King” – my apologies to fans of Tolkien. The purpose of this series is to focus our attention on what scripture has to say about Christian community. As we look at the passages forming each message, it is my hope and prayer that we will see more clearly what Christian community and fellowship looks like and feels like, not just in the Church overall, but especially here at the Chapel. In preparing for these messages, I have come to see that they are as much for me as they are for all of us. So let each of us open our hearts to be challenged and to strive to let God make this place be the kind of community He intended it to be.

Here is the series of messages that we will be going through. Tonight we will look at “The Means of Christian Community” as we work through 1 Cor. 12:12-31. The second message will look at “The Marks of Christian Community” based on Romans 12:1-21. The third message will consider “The Mandate of Christian Community” taken out of Ephesians 4:1-16. And the last message will focus on “The Measure of Christian Community” as we study Hebrews 10:19-25 and 1 John 3:11-4:12.

The subject of Christian community is an important one that impacts many aspects of our ministry here at Clearcreek Chapel. The Chapel is known as place where doctrine and truth are valued; where much is made of God in our teaching and worship; and where God’s word is faithfully taught and applied through our preaching and discipleship ministries. Not that we have arrived or should be prideful in this, but by God’s grace Clearcreek has been blessed beyond measure with people who love God and love His word.

Scripture says that to whom much has been given, much is expected. The Chapel has been blessed in many ways, but until glory, we should never think that we have arrived. I think at times it is good to stop and ask ourselves some hard questions. Not in a critical sense, but with a heart that simply seeks to better serve God and others through our personal and corporate ministries. So as a way of introduction, let me ask some tough questions on community. Can we strengthen our sense of, and our commitment to, community here at Clearcreek? Could the Chapel be more of a place, which by greater intention draws people not only into a deeper relationship with God, but into deeper relationships with one another? Could it be that we have become so attuned to a culture of independence and busyness that we no longer feel or practice the kind of love for one another that God intends within the Church? What more could God accomplish at Clearcreek in terms of growth, evangelism, and ministry, if we were to develop a greater commitment to Christian community?

What I am sharing with you in these four messages comes from a burden for community that has touched my heart over the last two years. It is my hope that these messages will stir up a similar passion for community and caring within this local body. The body of Christ, this local church, is made up of dear brothers and sisters in Christ. These are precious relationships in which we are part of a marvelous community. We are part of holy fellowship – a fellowship of a Holy King.

Tolkien's Book – The Fellowship of the Ring

Most of us are familiar with J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy the "Lord of the Rings." And if you did not read these books when you were younger, I am almost certain that most of you have seen one or more of Peter Jackson's epic movies over the last few years. I do not know how much of Tolkien's imagery is intentionally Biblical, but the title and theme of the first book, "The Fellowship of the Ring," struck me early on as I was preparing for this series.

The common thread through all three of these books is a small group of people from Middle Earth that form a fellowship with a mission to defeat evil by destroying the one ring that would rule them all. At the center of this fellowship are two unlikely heroes, Frodo Baggins and Sam Gamgee, two hobbits whose loyalty and perseverance carry the burden of the fellowship to its successful end. The title captured my thoughts because it used the word "fellowship" in a way that is different from how it is normally used.

Fellowship – What We Do

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Today, we tend to think of fellowship as something we have or do. We think of getting together to fellowship, or a gathering, often to share common interests and interact about over our lives. In this sense, fellowship is something we do as a community. Whether it is after church, at flock, or in our homes, it is a "being together" to build relationships with one another. This is an important aspect of Christian community. The New Testament church called it "koinonia"; a time to gather together as they shared food and encouraged one another.

Fellowship – Who We Are

But there is another sense of the word “fellowship” that defines who we are. This is the sense of Tolkien’s fellowship. A group united together by a common purpose. I think this definition also holds for Christian community. While we have common interests and join together to build relationships, [now please listen to this] what is even more important, is why we gather together and the common purpose that unites us. We are a fellowship gathered together for the purpose of bringing our God glory. We are united in Christ and joined together in service to the King. And not just any king, but the King of kings; who is also our Lord and Savior. As believers gathered together for a holy purpose, we are a fellowship of The King.

This thought started me thinking about fellowship in a different way. Specifically, that Clearcreek Chapel as a community, is a fellowship not just as a group of people united by common interests and beliefs, but that we are a people called by a marvelous God, united by Christ and His Spirit, and given a mission to live a kingdom life that is not of this world. It is an eternal fellowship that is lived by faith and in the Spirit, and yet it is a real and present calling that God, by His grace, has caused us to be a part of.

Message Introduction

Metaphors For the Church

Scripture is full of metaphors for the Church. Metaphors are symbolic illustrations that represent the essence of another thing. With respect to the Church, they help us to better understand our relationship to God and to one another. There are a number of significant metaphors for the Church in the Bible. The church is described as Christ's bride in Ephesians 5. It is described as a vine in John 15. Israel is described as sheep in the Old Testament as is the church in John 10.

But the most predominant metaphor for the New Testament Church in scripture is the body. Tonight's message from 1 Corinthians and the next two messages in this series from Romans 12 and Ephesians 4 all use the body as a metaphor for the Church. The strength of this metaphor has been wonderfully established by God, who is both the creator of the physical body and of the Church, as a means to better understand Christian community. For as we shall see, the body has a head and many members that function cooperatively together to live and act as one. It illustrates on several levels how we are to function as a fellowship of the King.

The Body as a Metaphor

As we look to our passage this evening, it will help us to develop the background and understand what and why Paul is writing in 1 Corinthians, Chapter 12. Despite the title of 1st Corinthians, this is probably not Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. It is likely that an earlier letter had been written, but despite this, the church at Corinth continued to have problems. What we are reading is Paul's answer their response to the earlier letter and addresses several concerns that were developing in the Corinthian church.

Most relevant to this passage were problems surrounding unity and division within the church. There was conflict over whose teaching they should be following; causing the church to divide into factions. There was a lack of consideration for others. Some with stronger consciences were judging those who felt liberty to eat meat that may have been offered to idols. And the Lord's Table had become a time for the wealthy to feast while the poor who arrived late were forgotten. Additionally, spiritual gifts that were meant to serve others were being misused. So into a church with some serious community problems, Paul used the metaphor of the body to illustrate some important lessons.

Unity and Diversity (v. 12:12-13)

One Body – A unity in doctrine and purpose

Just prior to this passage, Paul has reminded them of the diversity of gifts given for the good of the Church. God has equipped the Church, that is, all believers, with the gifts and abilities necessary to accomplish its purpose and missions. In verse 12 Paul reminds

them that they must use these gifts as a living community, united in both doctrine and purpose.

So we see that though there are many gifts, there is one body. There is an essential and necessary unity to our community, our fellowship. We must, by design, function together for a common purpose. There is a basic unity for believers that is seen in our one Lord, one Spirit, one doctrine, and shared calling that can not be separated from who we are in Christ.

Many Members – A diversity of gifts and roles

But just as there is one body, it is made up of many members. As a fellowship called to a holy purpose, there is a diversity of gifts and roles within the body. Paul elaborates on this later in the passage. But the essence here is that just as the body is one, it has different parts or members that make up the whole. Each part, though it is different, is equally a member of the one body.

Are you ever amazed at the complexity and wonder of the body? Despite all of man's knowledge, there are systems and functions of the body that are still beyond us. The thought that all these systems somehow evolved into place over time is simply beyond my ability to fathom. Rather, it seems clear that the human body was designed by God as a single entity made up of a diversity of parts. So it is with the Church. It is a living community designed by God to be a single entity, yet made up of many parts. And in many ways, it is no less wonderful and amazing than the human body.

Mutually Dependent

Under One Head

We see two other important points in these first two verses. First, Paul makes a connection between the body and Christ. The Church is Christ's body and He is its head. This is more than a figure of speech here. Scripture speaks of Christ and the Church as his body in Acts 9:4 and again in Eph. 1:22-23. We are to understand that Christ is the head of the Church and that we are His body. Just as the body is dependent upon the head for life and submits to its authority over the body, so we are utterly dependent upon Christ and must submit to His authority. The body can not function without the head. We are to see in this metaphor, that each of us, each member of the body, is mutually dependent upon Christ our head.

There is both a universal and local nature to the body. It is universal in that every believer in the world that has ever lived is a part of Christ's body. This body is both present, making up the Church today, and eternal in nature, as it dwells and will dwell with Christ in glory throughout eternity. But the body is local as well, seen local assemblies of believers who gather for God's glory under the authority of Elder's and godly leaders.

Under the headship of Christ, the body is also a kingdom community. It is an eternal kingdom that we live in by faith, but one that is no less real and is far more permanent. In fact, this kingdom community should take precedence and priority for

its members. You have heard it said from this pulpit before that we are first, brothers and sisters in Christ and fellow members of the body. There should be a sense of gravity and awe at what God has made us a part of. There should be a greater priority to our community and fellowship that draws and compels us to be together. And there should be a deeper commitment to our purpose and mission together as we serve the King of Glory.

In One Spirit

The second point is found in verse 13. Not only are we under one head, but we are joined together in one Spirit. Paul uses two expressions in this passage having to do with water, to convey that we share a common means of coming into and being sustained in Christ's body. The use and combination of water and the Spirit in this passage reminds us of similar passages and further establishes the connection and imagery of these two expressions.

I believe that the use of the word baptism here is not to be read literally, but rather in a spiritual sense. This phrase conveys the idea that all true believer's have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit in coming to Christ. We are dependent upon the work of the Spirit to bring us to a saving faith and place us into the body of Christ. Similarly, the last part of this verse conveys the thought that we all continue to drink or be filled with the Spirit's sustaining work as a result of being in the body.

It may be that Paul intends this expression to convey that as members of Christ's body we are completely saturated in the Spirit. Spiritually speaking, this is to be seen both externally, in the word "baptism", and internally, in the phrase "made to drink". The fullness of the resulting image conveys an essentialness of the Spirit's saturating presence in our lives as having a placing, unifying, and sustaining part of being in the body of Christ.

The Necessity of Members (v. 12:14-19)

An Essential Belonging

Paul marks the beginning of the next idea by repeating the main point that the body is indeed made up of many members. Having established the truth of the metaphor, he now addresses the implications for the Corinthian church. Under the inspiration of the Spirit, Paul compares the human body with the church to show us the necessity of members for its function and harmonious operation. As members of the community of believers we have an essential belonging to the body from which we can not be separated and is in fact part of God's wonderful design.

In verses 14 and 15, Paul presents what appears to be a silly hypothetical argument. What if the foot should perhaps jealously say, "Since I am not a hand, then I am not a part of the body"? Would it then cease to be a part of the body? The answer is obviously no. Similarly, if the ear were to envy the eye and claim it were not a part of

the body, would it still not belong to the body? Again, no. There is an essence to our belonging in the body that can not be changed.

Each member of the body is an essential part making it complete. As ridiculous as it sounds for a foot or an ear to not be a part of the body, so it is with each member of the church. While our roles and functions are different, we are essential to the body and make it complete. We are all equally a part of the body regardless of our gifting, talents, or function within it. A ministry worker should feel no less important than a ministry leader. Nor is one ministry leader a more important part of the body than another. For the church to function smoothly, we must all serve as God has enabled us to without envy or jealousy toward other members of the body.

An Essential Design

Trust - God has perfectly given members to the church

Not only is there an essential belonging of the members within the body, but we must trust and remember it is by God's perfect design that he has given each member to the church. Paul's argument again uses the ridiculous to illustrate a point. What if the whole body were an eye or ear? Where would the other functions be? How absurd to think of the whole body as an eye or nose. There is an essential need for diversity within the body. In order for the whole body to function each member must fill its designed role. Each member serves the others, and the body as a whole, as they use their gifts and abilities within the church. We must trust that God has given each of us particular skills with which to serve others, so that the body can function in harmony with respect to its purpose and mission.

Contentment – God is sovereign in our gifts and roles

In verse 18, Paul reminds the Corinthians that it is God who has placed each member into the body just as He has desired. We must be content in where God has placed us, the gifts He has given, and the roles we have been given. God is sovereign in the giving of our gifts and the roles we fill within the church. If we have a beef with our gifts and abilities, we must confess it as discontentment and repent of doubting the God who designed both the physical body and placed us, as designed, into the spiritual body of believers.

There is also a sense of wonder to think that God's care for the Church extends to placing believers into the body just as He desires so that it may function and fulfill His purposes and plans here on earth. Let us never forget that God has intentionally placed each of us into the body for a purpose. In the same sense that each member of Tolkien's fellowship had a necessary part to fulfill their mission, so we are a fellowship designed by God with a far holier and higher calling. Being a part of an eternal, kingdom fellowship is no trivial matter.

Mutual Dependence (v 12:20-26)

Our Mutual Need

In verse 20, Paul reiterates his main point that there is one body with many members. But now Paul takes a slightly different tact to speak not just about the nature of the body, but to our mutual dependence upon one another. Just as we are dependent upon Christ, the head of the body, so each member is mutually dependent upon the others. The truth of the matter is that, in a very real way, we need each other.

To illustrate this, Paul again uses the physical body. The eye is not able to say to the hand, "I have no need of you". Nor can any member of the body say this to another. While some members of the body can function with some independence, they cannot function independently of the others. If any part of the body is severed from the body, it dies. And just as each part of the body is not self-sufficient, neither is any member of Christ's body self-sufficient. We are designed by God to need each other.

Yet in so many ways, that is not how we function. Culturally, we are pressed to live independent lives. There is a weakened sense of our community and a diminished priority to the body life of the Church. If you judge by the way we live, it would seem that we often value work and casual relationships more than we do those within the body of Christ.

Are we not more comfortable in our own personal worlds where we can hide behind anonymity and privacy? Are we doing all that we can to follow the call of scripture to invest our time and abilities in the lives of others? Are we truly able to love and serve those whom we hardly even know? I struggle with this because there is such a busyness to modern life. Yes, it is good that our lives regularly involve our families, but we can fill our family lives so full of events, of constantly going here and there, that we do not make time to serve and develop relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ. We must find a balance so that we can make body life here at the Chapel the priority God wants it to be. Please listen, because this is important. If we do not do this at the Chapel by intention and design, it simply will not happen.

Our Mutual Caring

The implication toward weaker members

Next Paul illustrates our need to mutually care for one another just as the physical body does. First, in verse 22, Paul contrasts the stronger members to the weaker members. He may be contrasting stronger body parts like hands and feet with sensory or internal organs that can not defend themselves. This upside down logic runs counter to our thinking. But in fact, we see in our physical bodies that the weaker members are indeed more vital. Would we not lose our hands rather than our eyes or our feet rather than our ears?

Similarly, within the Church, it is easy for us to look down on someone who has a lesser role or is quieter than others. Paul may be referring to those in the body who are not leaders, but are humbly and meekly serving and giving strength to the body. Those who quietly and consistently serving in the Church are just as vital to its function and ministry. Paul may also be alluding to the responsibility of the stronger members to protect and care for the weaker members without looking down upon them. They are not to forget that they are equally a part of Christ's body.

The importance of unseen members

Next, in verses 23 to 25, Paul further demonstrates what the body is to be like through the example of how we treat our unrepresentable parts with humility and care. I find it interesting that God combined all these parts and designed our bodies in such a way that the greater parts give honor to the lesser. There is an importance of unseen members that is simply understood. Within the body there is to be a sense of humility and care that seeks to serve and honor the lesser members.

How many of you, when you got up this morning, consciously thought about whether or not your spleen was working? What about your hypothalamus, thyroid, thymus, liver, or a host of other silent body but essential parts of the body? Interesting how we never give these lesser members a thought, yet their proper function is critical to the health and strength of the body.

What should this look like in our life at the Chapel? I believe it means that we should be actively involved in helping and ministering to the weaker among us. In obvious ways, this means that we care for the needs of the widow, the single mother, the orphans, the sick, the poor, and others with physical needs among us. I think this extends to caring for those who are struggling with sin, hurting, or not as spiritually mature, with both humility and respect. So often we wait until there is a crisis in someone's life before we come along side a brother or sister. And well we should. But I believe that just as with the physical body, there should be a constant care and nurturing toward those who are the less seen members of the body of Christ, not just running to their aid during a spiritual emergency.

Our Mutual Connection

The result of this kind of thinking is seen in verse 26 which speaks to our mutual connection. That is, we are essentially connected to one another as part of one body. So that when one member suffers, all suffer. And when one member rejoices, all rejoice. To a great degree this cannot happen unless we are involved in each other's lives beyond a casual level. Our ability to share both grief and joy depends upon how well we know each other. Please listen carefully. There is a direct relationship between the closeness of our relationships within the body and the degree to which we can share as a community.

There is a difference in the heartfelt tears of a trusted friend shared over personal tragedy. There is a difference in the smiles and laughter shared between one who truly understand another's joy. There is a difference in the connection of families who have prayed together, ate together, and fellowshiped together in flock groups. There should be a depth and substance to our relationships that should be clearly evident both within the body of Christ and especially to those without.

Mutual Gifts (v 12:27-31)

An Appointed Distribution

Paul concludes this segment of his letter to the Corinthians with a few final thoughts on the appointment and distribution of gifts within the body. Again, he reminds them they are part of one body though they are each individually members of it. And as members they have each mutually been given gifts with which to serve on another.

First we see that God has appointed, by design, various roles and functions within the Church. For the purposes of this message, I am not going to go into the various roles listed here. But these verses point back to verses 18 through 21, reminding them of the essentialness of diversity within the body. Moreover, there is a necessity of differing roles that are designed to serve the whole by divine appointment. God perfectly distributes gifts to the members of the body for the good of the Church.

An Appointed Goal

There is some debate over the meaning of Paul's short conclusion in verse 31. But the best sense is that Paul is calling the Corinthians to an appointed goal of pursuing and developing the greater gifts which serve the body as opposed to speaking in tongues, which he discusses at length in an earlier part of the letter. Paul also points to a more excellent way, specifically love, which he will define in the next part of the letter. There he poetically and wonderfully describes what love is to look like in the body of Christ. Here again we see the priority of community life in the way that we use our gifts and abilities to serve others and not ourselves.

Lessons and Application

Let me take just a few more minutes to finish up by summarizing, drawing out a few lessons, and ask a few questions of application. I hope we have seen tonight that there is clearly an importance and uniqueness that is to characterize the body life at the Chapel. As a local church, and one that is so strongly committed to the Word and sound doctrine, we must actively fight against a culture and lifestyle choices that would keep us from drawing near as a community and being a fellowship of the King.

There are several lessons that are to be gleaned from this passage. The first is that there should be a seriousness and priority about our commitment to Christian community and the body life of the Church. Second, as believers we belong to an eternal, living, and kingdom community that has a high calling, purpose, and mission. Third, we are all equally members of this community, with God-given gifts and roles meant to serve the body as a whole. The

fourth lesson is that just as we are dependent upon Christ the head for life, we are mutually dependent and need each other. Fifth, we must live with care and humility towards the weaker members of the body. Lastly, let us strive to know each other better that we may share more deeply together in life's joys and sorrows.

So what are some personal application questions we can ask ourselves? I put together a few, but I am sure you can come up with others as you consider this passage and perhaps re-read it in the days and months ahead. One, how can I be more committed to the body life at Clearcreek Chapel? Two, do I make the most of opportunities to attend Bible education, morning and evening services, flock, and other community gatherings? Three, do I complain or grumble about my role or the lack of thanks and appreciation received from others? Four, am I tangibly and regularly investing my time and gifts into the lives of others? Five, am I faithfully serving in a ministry or ministries for the good of the body? Six, do I look down on those who are struggling or do I humbly look for ways to serve and help them? Seven, am I actively and regularly trying to build relationships within the body?

Let me ask you to look around. These dear people are your brothers and sisters. Imperfect? Yes, but growing in grace, redeemed by God's design, and called to serve the King. We are inseparably joined together in Christ – and whether we acknowledge it or not, we need each other. We are all a part of the body of Christ – a fellowship of the King. May God by His grace allow us to live like it.