



Edifying the Assembly

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1st Corinthians 14:1-12

Being the assembly of the Body of Christ is not easy. It may be simple, but it cuts against the grain of an individualistic society. We place great value on individual rights, desires, dreams, and initiatives. We speak of independence, drive, and personal ambition as key ingredients in defining a person's contribution and value within society. We ask about the benefit we personally receive from the actions of another as central to assessing their worth. Being the Body of Christ, however, demands a radically different focal point. It looks not to the individual, so much as to the whole. It sees the needs of each member, but looks to how each contributes outward to meet those same needs.

The assembly of saints in Corinth did not get it. They failed to grasp this essence of Christian identity and purpose. They did not see that being the assembly of the faithful meant giving up concern with self and replacing it with concern for the larger body. They were focused inwardly on issues of personal worth and standing, when God would have them focus on issues of caring and growing in their corporate expression and identity as a people called to represent Christ Jesus.

How does one love, without togetherness? How does one demonstrate unity, when we fail to find a reason to look beyond those things that would separate us and seek to build a corporate identity among ourselves? How do we become the Body of Christ, if we fail to invest in one another for something greater than personal gain?

The assembly in Corinth focused on self. They placed value on what each one of them might gain from shared actions and decisions and experiences. They sought after those things that individually made them feel secure, wanted, prized, or cherished. They wanted to be seen as better than others. They strove for privilege and importance. They failed to give importance to God's call for them to become the Body of Christ. Selfish ambition stood in the way of their becoming servants of God.

While they failed miserably to live up to God's plan for their lives, they thought all was in order. They allowed their diverse definitions of what was right and just to distract them from truly hearing the demands of the gospel on their lives. They each looked at what made them feel satisfied in worship. Each valued what brought them a sense of importance when they assembled. Whether it was being the center of attention for speaking in tongues, socio-economic standing when they gathered for meals, status from claims of orthodoxy or knowledge from theological pedigrees, or declaring themselves more spiritual for an extravagant reliance on God's grace, their thoughts were of themselves as groups or individuals. They did not really see themselves as a Body, nor did they give proper value to edifying their corporate expression of God's presence.

Life revolved around privilege and personal blessing. Life focused on self, with little more than a surface acknowledgement of a corporate responsibility in the gospel. In actuality, they gathered together not to become something greater as a whole, but to feel better about themselves as individuals. They pitted themselves against one another to position themselves in competition for God's attention, blessing, and greater acceptance. They strove for prominence of place, not unity in submission to God's purpose.

They altogether missed the fact that being the Body of Christ is not a competition. The gospel is not about which one of us or which category of us is better, more worthy, or more acceptable to God. It is not about measuring value and worth on any grounds at all. It is about becoming one in love. It is about a new understanding of self as part of something larger on the simple basis of grace.

The Corinthian focus on spiritual gifts sidetracked them from the deeper issues of being the people of God. They were looking at gifts from the standpoint of the benefit to the gifted. The purpose of the gift was ignored. If I speak as gifted, it is not for my benefit, but for the benefit of others. If I serve as gifted, it is not for my benefit, but for the benefit of others. If I teach as gifted, it is not for my benefit, but for the benefit of others. If I prophesy, sing, contribute, administer, heal, assist, encourage, comfort, or welcome as gifted, it is not for my benefit, but for the benefit of others. If it is for my own benefit that I participate, I have missed the point.

I am not the focus of the gospel. When I am the focus, I do not love. When I am at the center of my ministry, my purpose is lost. When I join with others of the Body of Christ, I must make that Body the focus of my actions, attitudes, response, and participation. Otherwise, it is not the purpose of the gospel for which I enter, but for some selfish reason of my own.

“If I speak with the tongues of angels, but have not love, I am nothing.” If the focus of my life does not lift me beyond my self-centered interests, my actions and participation in the Body empowered by God’s Spirit do not fulfill God’s purposes in the Body, for I have removed myself from them. I focus on myself and miss the larger blessing.

Love requires that I empty myself that I might be filled by God. When I focus on my desires, needs, and ambitions, I fail to see the worth of those for whom Christ has come. When I fail to minister to the Body all around me without regard to self, I fail to recognize the purposes of God for my life. I fail to trust that God will care for my needs without my need to champion my own success, merit, or worth. I fail to cast my life upon the sufficiency of God’s love and provision.

My participation in the gospel is not in regard to my personal benefit. It is about how I can minister to the benefit of others. Becoming the Body of Christ requires assuming the purposes of Christ Jesus, who gave himself in order that others might be blessed. It does not make me more important than Jesus Christ. It does not give me greater value than others. Christ died for them, as well. In accepting what Christ has done for me, I am called to participate in the very purposes of God, not to make more of myself, but to become an extension of God’s love, grace, and acceptance to others.

Being part of the body is not about calling attention to myself. It is about submitting myself to the needs and well-being of the body, actively participating in purposes greater than my own. I must look beyond my own enjoyment, my own worth, my own benefit, my own ambitions to the reason I have been called to edify the assembly of the Body. It is not for selfish advancement.

There is something counter-intuitive about the gospel. It is in my best interest not to concern myself with my own best interests. My greatest benefit is not in receiving, but in giving. That is the pattern of Christ Jesus. He did not come to be served, but to serve, rescue, ransom, redeem, restore, heal, and bless. In so doing, Jesus established a pattern for our lives. It is only when we live for the benefit of the larger Body that we can be truly fulfilled.

Speaking in tongues places me on center stage. That is not where I belong. Contributing to the good of others places the Body of Christ on center stage. It exalts the work and mission of Christ Jesus. It edifies the assembly of the saints, the representation of Christ’s presence and mission in the world.

Until the sum of my actions and attitudes serve wholly to edify the larger assembly of the Body of Christ, I am missing the purpose of representing Christ Jesus. It is much easier to work for my own benefit, comfort, and desires. Yet if I set aside the call and challenge to be the Body of Christ, what have I truly gained? When I live for myself, I maim the Body and lose what really matters.

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