

The Church in the New Testament, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 9: One Body, Many Members

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

For eight weeks the class has watched the church in Acts. This week Paul tells them what it is. Set the context before you begin, because it explains everything about the tone of the passage: Corinth was a mess. Members were suing each other, splitting into factions behind Paul and Apollos and Cephas, tolerating scandalous sin, and turning the Lord's Supper into a humiliation of the poor. And in chapter 12 they were ranking one another by their spiritual gifts, with the showier gifts near the top and everyone else feeling either superior or worthless. Paul's answer to all of it is not a rebuke about attitude. It is a doctrine. He tells them what they are, and then lets the truth do the correcting.

There is a contextual point worth handling carefully with your class. The gifts Paul lists on either side of this passage, in verses 8 through 10 and 28 through 30, are miraculous: tongues, healings, prophecy, working of miracles. Those belonged to the age of confirmation and have ceased, as Paul says himself in the very next chapter (1 Corinthians 13:8-10), and the class has met that boundary several times this quarter. But do not let that observation swallow the lesson, because the argument Paul makes here does not depend on the gifts being miraculous. He is teaching what a body is: many members, God's arrangement, mutual need, no one dispensable, no one independent. Every word of that applies to the congregation your class sits in on Sunday, and it applies with force.

Aim the lesson at both ends of the room, because Paul does. He speaks first to the member who feels useless, the foot saying "because I am not a hand, I do not belong," and tells him his sense of not belonging does not make it so. Then he turns to the member who feels superior, the eye saying to the hand "I have no need of you," and tells him the parts that seem weaker are indispensable. Both people are in your class. And hold verse 27 out as the goal: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." Not like a body. Are one. Once that lands, the competition in Corinth becomes as absurd as an eye congratulating itself for not being a foot.

Question 1

Student Question:

In verse 12, Paul says the body is one and has many members, and "all the members of the body, though many, are one body." How does this analogy describe the church's unity and diversity?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Have the class notice how Paul finishes the sentence, because it is not what anyone expects. "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." Not "so it is with the church." So it is with Christ. Paul is saying the church is Christ's body so completely that he can simply use His name. That is the foundation of everything else in the passage, and it explains why Jesus asked Saul on the Damascus road, "why are you persecuting me?" when Saul had never touched Him. Hurt the body, and you have touched the Head.

Then take the analogy apart with the class, because it holds both truths at once and we usually collapse it into one. A body is genuinely one thing; nobody meets your hand and your foot as separate acquaintances. And a body is genuinely many things, wildly different from each other, doing entirely unrelated jobs. The unity does not erase the difference, and the difference does not break the unity. That is the exact balance Corinth had lost, and that most congregations lose in one direction or the other.

Show the class the two failures the analogy prevents. One is uniformity, where we imagine unity means everyone being the same, which would make a body a lump. Paul will say in verse 17 that if the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be. A congregation where everyone is alike is not unified; it is disabled. The other failure is fragmentation, where difference becomes division, which is what happened at Corinth: "I follow Paul," "I follow Apollos" (1 Corinthians 1:12). A body whose parts declare independence is not diverse. It is dismembered.

Draw out what makes the unity real, because this is where the class needs precision. What makes a body one is not that the parts agree, or like each other, or resemble each other. It is that they share one life and one head. The church's unity is not an achievement of goodwill; it is a fact created by God, which is exactly what the class saw in Lesson 2. Paul says in Ephesians 4:3-6 that we are to maintain the unity of the Spirit, not manufacture it. It is already there because Christ is one.

Bring it near. Ask the class to name the person here least like them, and then say out loud what Paul's analogy requires: that person is not an obstacle to our unity, that person is what makes us a body rather than a lump. Most of us say we value difference in principle and find it exhausting in practice.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Paul says "so it is with Christ," identifying the church with Christ Himself (1 Corinthians 12:12)
- This is why persecuting the church is persecuting Christ (Acts 9:4)
- A body is genuinely one and genuinely many; unity does not erase difference, and difference does not break unity
- Uniformity would disable the body: if all were an eye, where would the hearing be (1 Corinthians 12:17)
- Fragmentation was Corinth's error: "I follow Paul," "I follow Apollos" (1 Corinthians 1:12)

- Unity rests on one life and one Head, not on agreement or similarity
- Unity is maintained, not manufactured; it is a fact God created (Ephesians 4:3-6)

Discussion Prompts

- Who here is least like you? What does Paul's analogy require you to say about that person?
- Which failure are we closer to: everyone the same, or everyone independent?
- Why does Paul say "so it is with Christ" instead of "so it is with the church"?

Question 2

Student Question:

Verse 13 says, "In one Spirit we were all baptized into one body." What does this teach about how a person enters the body of Christ, and why is baptism central to this picture?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Fasten the class on the two small words that carry the verse: all, and one. "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and all were made to drink of one Spirit." Every Christian at Corinth had this. Not the mature ones, not the gifted ones, not a second tier who had gone further. All. And the result was one body, with the old dividing lines of race and status named and dissolved in the same breath.

Now handle the identification of this baptism carefully, because the class may have been taught that this refers to a separate Holy Spirit baptism that some Christians receive and others lack. Reason it out with them from the text. Paul says all were baptized this way, so whatever it is, every Christian at Corinth had received it. But Holy Spirit baptism in Scripture was never something all Christians received and never something anyone was commanded to do; it fell on the apostles at Pentecost and on Cornelius's household, in both cases as an act of God confirming His work, and it was a promise rather than a command. Meanwhile Paul tells the Ephesians there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4:5). The baptism that every Christian shares, that is commanded, and that puts a person into Christ is the one Jesus commissioned and the apostles preached.

Then show the class how completely the New Testament ties baptism to entering the body. Galatians 3:27 says as many as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ, and the very next verse says the same dividing lines are gone: neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free. Romans 6:3-4 says we were baptized into His death and raised to walk in newness of life. Acts 2:41 and 47 say those who received the word were baptized, and the Lord added them. Paul is not introducing something new here. He is reminding a fractured church of the moment they all shared, which is why the phrase "in one Spirit" matters: this baptism is not our arrangement. It is God's work, done at His direction, by which He places us in the body, exactly as the class saw in Lesson 1 when the Lord added the saved.

This is also the natural place to make sure the class can state the two ways Scripture uses the word “church,” because both are in front of them right now. Sometimes it means the whole body of the saved, every Christian everywhere without regard to time or place, which is the body every one of us was baptized into here in verse 13, and which Christ loved and gave Himself for (Ephesians 5:25). Sometimes it means a single local congregation in one place, which is who Paul is writing to: “the church of God that is in Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1:2). Those are the only two senses in Scripture. There is no third thing, no family of congregations bound together under a shared human organization, and no Christian is ever said to be saved by belonging to such a thing. Watch how easily Paul moves between the two senses in this chapter without confusion, because both are true of the same people.

Then guard a mistake that is easy to make in a congregation that loves the New Testament pattern, because it is the mirror image of denominationalism rather than its opposite. It is possible to hear all of this and conclude that our congregation is the church Jesus built, the one established at Pentecost. It is not, and Scripture is careful here in a way we often are not. The church established in Jerusalem that day is the universal body, all the saved of every time and place. A congregation meeting today is not that body, and it is not a piece of that body either. It is a group of Christians in one place who work and worship together, and it began whenever they first began to meet. Notice how Paul closes his letter to the Romans: “All the churches of Christ greet you” (Romans 16:16). Plural. There were many churches of Christ, because the phrase describes congregations belonging to Christ, and no single one of them was the whole. Our congregation is a church of Christ. It is not the church of Christ, and the moment we say otherwise we have made ourselves exactly what we claim to reject: one body, in one place, claiming to be the whole.

Draw out what this does to Corinth’s problem, because it is devastating to it. If God put you in this body, then your membership is not your achievement and not your possession. You did not join, and you cannot resign, and you certainly cannot rank yourself. The gifted man and the ordinary man walked into the same water. Ask the class what happens to spiritual pride when you remember that everyone here came in the same door.

Bring it near without pressure. The class has now seen baptism from three angles this quarter: the birth of the church in Lesson 1, the Ethiopian in Lesson 4, and here, where it is the shared moment that makes a divided church one. Ask them what they remember about their own, and whether they have ever thought of it as the thing they have in common with the person across the room whom they find hardest to love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- All Christians at Corinth had this baptism; it was universal, not a second experience for some (1 Corinthians 12:13)
- Holy Spirit baptism was never universal and never commanded; it was a promise fulfilled at Pentecost and at Cornelius’s house

- There is one baptism for all Christians (Ephesians 4:5)
- Baptism is how one is clothed with Christ and how dividing lines are dissolved (Galatians 3:27-28)
- Baptism is a burial and resurrection into newness of life (Romans 6:3-4)
- God places the baptized into the body; membership is His work, not our achievement (Acts 2:41, 47)
- Scripture uses “church” in only two senses: the whole body of the saved everywhere (Ephesians 5:25), and a single local congregation (1 Corinthians 1:2)
- There is no third sense; no family of congregations under a shared human organization exists in the New Testament
- No one is saved by belonging to such an organization; God adds the saved to the body of Christ
- A local congregation is not the church established at Pentecost, nor a piece of it; it is Christians in one place who work and worship together, begun whenever they began meeting
- Paul greets many “churches of Christ” in the plural, describing congregations belonging to Christ (Romans 16:16)
- Our congregation is a church of Christ, not the church of Christ; claiming otherwise repeats the error we reject
- Since everyone entered the same way, spiritual ranking is impossible

Discussion Prompts

- Everyone here came in the same door. What does that do to spiritual pride?
- How would you answer someone who says this verse refers to a Spirit baptism only some Christians receive?
- What do you remember about your own baptism? Do you think of it as what you share with the person hardest for you to love?

Question 3

Student Question:

In verses 14–17, Paul uses the example of the foot, hand, ear, and eye. What is Paul’s point about members who feel they do not belong or are not important?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Read verse 15 slowly, because Paul has written a small heartbreak into it: “If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body.” Notice who is talking. This is not the eye dismissing the foot. This is the foot dismissing itself. Paul deals with the self-excluding member before he ever gets to the arrogant one, which tells you which problem he thought was more common and more painful.

Then notice what the foot is actually doing, because the class needs to see the logic. The foot is comparing. It has decided what a valuable member looks like, and it has chosen the hand as the standard, and by that standard it has failed. But nobody asked the foot to be a hand. The whole grievance rests on a measurement God never made. Ask the class where they got their own standard for what a valuable Christian looks like. Almost always it is borrowed from someone else, and almost always it is a member with a more visible role.

Now let Paul's answer land, because it is stronger than reassurance: "that would not make it any less a part of the body." He does not soothe the foot or flatter it. He tells it that its feelings are simply not decisive. This is important for your class, because we usually answer people who feel useless by praising them, which does not work and does not last. Paul does something better. He tells the foot that belonging is a fact, established by God, and that the foot's opinion of itself does not have the authority to overturn it.

Then he presses it to absurdity in verse 17, which is Paul at his most pointed: "If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be?" Push the foot's logic out and you get a monster. If everyone were the impressive member the foot admires, the body would be a single enormous eyeball, unable to hear, unable to move, unable to do anything but stare. Let the class laugh at that, and then feel the point: the very difference the foot is grieving over is the thing that makes the body work.

Bring it home to the specific person in your class who needs it, because there is one. Someone in that room believes their contribution does not count: they do not teach, do not lead, do not speak up, and they have quietly concluded they are attending rather than belonging. Ask them where they got that idea, because it did not come from this passage. And ask the rest of the class the harder question: what have we done that made them think it?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Paul addresses the self-excluding member before the arrogant one (1 Corinthians 12:15)
- The foot's grievance rests on a comparison God never asked it to make
- Feelings of not belonging do not have the authority to overturn a fact God established
- Paul answers with truth rather than flattery or reassurance
- If all were one impressive member, the body would be disabled (1 Corinthians 12:17)
- The difference being grieved over is precisely what makes the body function
- Congregations can teach members to feel dispensable without ever saying so

Discussion Prompts

- Where did you get your standard for what a valuable Christian looks like?
- Do you ever feel like you are attending rather than belonging? What produced that?
- What have we done that might make someone here believe their part does not count?

Question 4

Student Question:

Verse 18 says, “God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.” What does this teach about God’s intentional design for the church?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Point the class at the three parts of this sentence, because each one closes a door. “God arranged” closes the door on accident; nobody drifted into this body and nothing about its makeup is random. “Each one of them” closes the door on the idea that God planned the body in general and left individuals to sort themselves out; He arranged each one, individually, personally. And “as he chose” closes the door on our editing. This is His arrangement, made according to His judgment, and it was not put to a vote.

Now let the class feel what that does to the foot from verse 15. The foot said it did not belong. Paul’s answer is not “yes you do, cheer up.” It is “God put you there, on purpose, as He chose.” To keep insisting you do not belong is to say God made a mistake in your case. Help your class see how the argument works. Paul does not defeat feelings of worthlessness with encouragement; he defeats them with the doctrine of God’s sovereign, deliberate design.

Then turn it on the other end of the room, because it cuts both ways and Paul intends it to. If God arranged each member as He chose, then the person you find useless was placed here by God, deliberately. Your assessment of them is a criticism of His arrangement. The eye in verse 21 cannot say to the hand “I have no need of you,” not because that would be unkind, but because it would be false. God decided the hand was needed.

Guard the class against a misreading here, because the language of God choosing will make some hear the Calvinism they met in Lesson 2. Paul is not saying God unconditionally selects some individuals for salvation and passes over others. The subject is not who gets saved; the whole context is the arrangement of gifts and functions among people who are already in the body. Everyone in this passage is a member. Paul is talking about placement within the body, not entrance into it, and entrance he already described in verse 13, where all were baptized into one body.

Bring it home in two directions. Ask the class the encouraging version: if God arranged you here, deliberately, what might He have arranged you here for? And then the searching version: is there anyone in this congregation you privately consider a mistake? Because verse 18 says God chose them, and that leaves us with only one place to put the complaint.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- “God arranged” rules out accident; “each one of them” rules out generality; “as he chose” rules out our editing (1 Corinthians 12:18)
- Insisting you do not belong contradicts God’s deliberate placement
- Paul answers worthlessness with the doctrine of God’s design, not with encouragement

- Judging another member useless is a criticism of God's arrangement
- This verse concerns placement and function within the body, not who is chosen for salvation
- Entrance into the body was described in verse 13; everyone here is already a member
- Against reading Calvinistic unconditional election into the language of God choosing

Discussion Prompts

- If God arranged you here deliberately, what might He have arranged you here for?
- Is there anyone in this congregation you privately consider a mistake?
- Why does Paul answer worthlessness with doctrine rather than with encouragement?

Question 5

Student Question:

In verses 21–22, Paul says the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” and that the “parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.” How does this challenge attitudes of superiority in the church?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice the shift, because Paul has turned to face a different person. Verses 15 through 20 spoke to the member who felt worthless. Now, in verse 21, he addresses the member who feels essential: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’” He has chosen the two most prestigious parts and the two most obviously servile, and he has forbidden exactly the sentence such a person would say.

Let the class see why that sentence is not merely rude but false. The eye genuinely cannot say it. An eye without a hand is a spectator; an eye without feet cannot get anywhere. The most impressive member of the body is also the most helpless one on its own. Paul is not asking the eye to be humble as a courtesy. He is telling it the truth about its own situation. Superiority in the church is not chiefly a sin of manners; it is a factual error.

Then take up verse 22, which is the sharpest thing in the passage: “the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.” Not tolerable. Not valuable too. Indispensable, meaning the body cannot do without them. And notice the word “seem.” Their weakness is an appearance, not a fact. Ask the class to name the parts of a human body that fit this. The organs you cannot see, that do nothing impressive, that no one admires, and without which you would be dead within minutes. The visible parts are the ones you can most afford to lose.

Now make the class do the translation, because this is where it bites. Who are the seemingly weaker members here? Usually the ones with no platform: the elderly member who cannot do much but prays, the person who sets up chairs, the one who quietly notices newcomers, the widow whose faith has held for fifty years without an audience. Paul says the congregation

cannot do without them. Meanwhile the members everyone can name are the eyes, and the eye is the part Paul chose to humble.

Bring it home honestly, because Corinth's problem is not ancient. Ranking still happens, and it shows up in who gets thanked, whose opinion is sought, whose absence is noticed. Ask the class the direct question: whom have you been living as though you did not need? Paul's answer is that you are not permitted to need them less, because you actually do need them more than you know.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Paul turns from the member who feels worthless to the one who feels essential (1 Corinthians 12:21)
- The eye genuinely cannot say it; superiority is a factual error, not merely bad manners
- The most impressive member is the most helpless on its own
- The seemingly weaker parts are indispensable; the body cannot do without them (1 Corinthians 12:22)
- "Seem" signals that their weakness is appearance, not fact
- In a body, the invisible organs are essential and the visible parts are most expendable
- Ranking shows up in who is thanked, whose opinion is sought, and whose absence is noticed

Discussion Prompts

- Whom have you been living as though you did not need?
- Who are the seemingly weaker members here, and what would we lose without them?
- Why is superiority a factual error rather than just a bad attitude?

Question 6

Student Question:

Verses 23–24 describe God giving "greater honor to the part that lacked it." What does this mean in the life of a congregation? How should the church treat its less visible members?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Walk the class through what Paul actually says, because the imagery is delicate and he is being deliberately modest about it. "The parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require." He is talking about clothing. We cover what is private, and we do not cover a face. Nobody drapes a hand. The parts we would be ashamed to display are the ones we take the most care with, and we do it without thinking, every single morning.

Then let the class see the argument. Paul is not telling them to start honoring the lowly. He is telling them they already do it, instinctively, with their own bodies, and have never once

considered it a burden. You do not resent getting dressed. You do not think the modest parts are demanding too much. This is simply how a body treats itself. So when a congregation refuses that same care to its own less visible members, it is not merely being unkind; it is behaving in a way no one behaves toward his own flesh.

Now point at the source, because verse 24 says who does this: “But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it.” God did this. It is His compensating design, and it runs against every human instinct about status. The world gives honor to the parts that already have it; that is what status means. God builds the opposite arrangement into a body, deliberately, so that the parts nobody would applaud are protected and cared for most.

Show the class that this is God’s consistent way, not a quirk of this passage. He chose what is foolish, weak, and low to shame the strong (1 Corinthians 1:26-29). James rebukes a church for seating the rich man well and the poor man at their feet (James 2:1-4). Jesus said the greatest among you shall be your servant, and He washed feet, which is the most literal possible act of honoring the least honorable part. Ask the class what it means that our God consistently moves in the direction the world moves away from.

Bring it home practically, because this one can actually be obeyed this week. Honoring the less visible is not a feeling; it is an action, and it is specific. It looks like naming the person who did the unnoticed thing, asking the quiet member what he thinks and waiting for the answer, visiting the one who cannot come, and putting people who will never be on a platform in front of the congregation’s gratitude. Ask the class: who here has never been thanked? Start there.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Paul’s image is clothing: we already cover and care most for the parts we would not display (1 Corinthians 12:23)
- Honoring the less honorable is instinctive toward our own bodies and never felt as a burden
- A congregation that withholds this care behaves in a way no one behaves toward his own flesh
- God composed the body this way, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it (1 Corinthians 12:24)
- This runs against status, which gives honor to those who already have it
- God consistently chooses the low and shames the strong (1 Corinthians 1:26-29; James 2:1-4)
- Honor is an action, not a feeling: naming, asking, visiting, thanking

Discussion Prompts

- Who here has never been thanked?
- Why do we not resent getting dressed, yet resent giving this same care to people?
- What does it mean that God consistently moves toward what the world moves away from?

Question 7

Student Question:

According to verse 25, God's design is "that there may be no division in the body." Why is division so contrary to God's purpose for the church?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Point out that Paul finally states the purpose of the entire chapter here: "that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another."

Everything since verse 12, the foot, the eye, the hidden organs, God's arranging, has been aimed at this. Notice the shape of it. He does not say God arranged the body so that no one would feel bad. He says God arranged it so that there would be no division. The design itself is anti-division, built to make schism unnatural.

Then ask the class why the design accomplishes that, and let them reason it out from what they have seen. Because if God placed each member, no one can be dismissed. If the weaker parts are indispensable, no one can be ranked. If the eye needs the hand, no one can be independent. Division requires you to believe that you can do without someone, and Paul has spent thirteen verses proving that you cannot. He does not forbid division so much as demonstrate that it is impossible without injury.

Now let the class feel the word he uses, because it is stronger than we hear. The word translated division is the word for a tear or a rip, used of an unshrunk patch tearing a garment. Division in a body is not a disagreement; it is a wound. You cannot have a schism in a body without blood. That is what Paul is telling Corinth: your factions are not a difference of opinion about teachers, they are a body tearing itself.

Show the class why this offends God so directly. The body belongs to Christ, and Christ is not divided, which is exactly how Paul opened this letter: "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you?" (1 Corinthians 1:13). To split the body is to make a lie out of the gospel we preach, since the message is that Christ reconciles people to God and to each other, breaking down the dividing wall (Ephesians 2:14-16). Jesus prayed for our oneness so the world would believe (John 17:20-21), which the class saw in Lesson 2. Division does not merely damage us. It contradicts Him.

Bring it home carefully, because the class needs both halves. Not every disagreement is division, and Lesson 7 showed a church contending hard for the truth and coming out more unified. What Paul condemns here is not conviction but the tearing of a body over preference, personality, and rank. Ask the class where our seams are, and whether we are pulling on them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Verse 25 states the purpose of the whole argument: no division, and the same care for one another
- The design itself is anti-division; God arranged the body to make schism unnatural
- Division requires believing you can do without someone, which Paul has proven false
- The word for division means a tear; a schism in a body is a wound, not a disagreement
- The body is Christ's and Christ is not divided (1 Corinthians 1:13)
- Division contradicts the gospel of reconciliation and the prayer of Jesus (Ephesians 2:14-16; John 17:20-21)
- Contending for truth is not division; tearing a body over preference and rank is

Discussion Prompts

- Where are our seams, and are we pulling on them?
- Why is a schism in a body a wound rather than a difference of opinion?
- How is contending for the truth (Lesson 7) different from what Paul condemns here?

Question 8

Student Question:

Verse 26 says, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together." What does this look like in a healthy, functioning congregation?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Start with the fact that Paul is not issuing a command here. Read it again: "If one member suffers, all suffer together." He is describing what a body does. Step on a nail and you do not decide to care; your whole body is instantly involved, your voice, your face, your hands, your balance. Nothing has to be organized. Help the class see the implication, because it is uncomfortable: if a member of this congregation is suffering and the rest of us feel nothing, that is not a failure of compassion. It is a symptom of numbness, which in a body means something is dead or disconnected.

Take the two halves separately, because they are not equally hard. Suffering together is the easier one; most congregations can rally for a funeral or a diagnosis. Rejoicing together is far harder, and Paul knew it. When another member is honored, the natural response of the human heart is not joy but comparison. That was Corinth's entire disease, and it is why Paul puts rejoicing in the same verse. A body that can weep with a brother but cannot celebrate him without a pang has not yet understood what it is.

Then show the class why rejoicing is the deeper test. Grief costs us sympathy; joy costs us position. To genuinely rejoice when someone else is honored, you must have stopped competing with them, which means you must have stopped measuring yourself by them, which is exactly what the foot and the eye were doing. Paul says elsewhere, "Rejoice with those who

rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15), and he puts rejoicing first there too. It is the harder verb.

Now get concrete, because “suffer together” stays abstract otherwise. What does it look like? Knowing enough about people to know they are suffering, which requires proximity most of us do not have. Showing up. Carrying something practical: meals, rides, money, time. And staying past the first week, when everyone else has gone back to normal and the suffering has not. Ask the class to think of someone whose crisis is now six months old and whom nobody calls anymore.

Bring it home with the diagnostic question, because this verse is a mirror for a congregation. Not “do we care?” but “would we know?” If someone here lost a job, or a marriage, or a child’s faith this month, would this church feel it? A body always feels it. If we do not, the problem is not our hearts. It is our connections.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Paul describes what a body does rather than issuing a command (1 Corinthians 12:26)
- Feeling nothing when a member suffers is a symptom of numbness, not merely a lack of compassion
- Rejoicing together is harder than suffering together; honor provokes comparison
- Grief costs sympathy; joy costs position, which is why rejoicing is the deeper test
- Scripture puts rejoicing first as well (Romans 12:15)
- Real suffering together requires proximity, presence, practical help, and persistence past the first week
- The diagnostic is not “do we care?” but “would we know?”

Discussion Prompts

- If someone here lost a job or a marriage this month, would we know?
- Whose crisis is now six months old, and who has stopped calling?
- Which is harder for you: weeping with someone, or rejoicing when they are honored?

Question 9

Student Question:

In verse 27, Paul declares, “You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” How does this identity—belonging to Christ’s body—shape the way Christians view themselves and one another?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Have the class notice the verb, because everything hangs on it. Paul does not say you are like the body of Christ, or that the body is a helpful way to think about church. He says you are.

Fifteen verses of analogy land on a flat statement of fact. And he says it to Corinth, of all churches, the one full of lawsuits, factions, arrogance, and scandal. He does not say “you should be.” He says “you are,” to people who were not acting like it, because identity in the New Testament is what God has made you, and behavior is supposed to catch up to it.

Then take both halves of the sentence, because Paul balances them precisely. “You are the body of Christ,” corporate, plural, one thing. “And individually members of it,” personal, particular, each one. He will not let the class collapse into either error. You are not merely an individual with a private faith who attends things. And you are not swallowed up into a crowd where you do not matter as yourself. You are a distinct member of a single body, which is a harder and better thing than either.

Now make the composition of the body explicit, because this verse settles a question that causes real confusion and Paul could not have been clearer. What is the body of Christ made of? Individual saved people. Look at what the members are in Paul’s anatomy: an eye, a hand, a foot, an ear. Every single one is a person. Nowhere in this chapter, or anywhere else, does Paul say that a congregation is a member of the body. He says the opposite here in the plainest words available: you are the body of Christ, “and individually members of it.” Individually. He tells the Romans the same thing: “we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Romans 12:5). The body of Christ is made up of Christians, not of churches.

Let the class feel why that is not a technicality, because the consequence is enormous. If congregations were the units that make up the universal body, then a lost man who persuaded a congregation to receive him onto its roll would thereby be in the body of Christ, saved by the decision of men. That is impossible, and the New Testament never permits it. Congregations do not compose the body; the saved compose it, and the Lord adds them one at a time as they obey the gospel (Acts 2:47). So a congregation is not in Christ. The saved people who make it up are in Christ. That also means a congregation can be entirely sound and still contain people who are lost, exactly as Simon was in the church at Samaria and in the bond of iniquity (Acts 8:13, 23). A congregation can put a man on its roll. It cannot put him in Christ.

Draw out what this does to how a Christian sees himself, because it answers both people Paul has been addressing. To the foot who felt worthless: you are not deciding whether you belong; you are told what you are. Your identity is not your self-assessment. To the eye who felt essential: you are a member, one of many, in a body you did not assemble and do not run. Both people are being told the same sentence, and it humbles one and lifts the other with the same words.

Then let it reshape how they see one another, which is the point of the whole chapter. If the person across the aisle is a member of Christ’s body, then how you treat him is how you treat Christ’s body, and Paul has already said in verse 12 that this body is simply “Christ.” That is not sentiment. Jesus said what is done to the least of His brothers is done to Him (Matthew 25:40),

and Saul heard on the road that persecuting the church was persecuting Him. Your brother is not merely someone Christ loves. He is part of Christ's own body, and you cannot handle him roughly and leave the Head untouched.

Bring it home. Ask the class to answer the question "who are you?" using Paul's sentence rather than their job, family, or personality. Most of us have an identity we would list first, and this is not it. Then ask the harder half: if this is what the person beside you is, what needs to change about how you treat them Monday through Saturday?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Paul says you are the body, not that you are like it (1 Corinthians 12:27)
- He says it to a badly behaving church; identity is what God made us, and behavior must catch up
- The sentence is both corporate and individual; neither private faith nor a faceless crowd
- The body of Christ is composed of individual saved people, not of congregations; every member in Paul's anatomy is a person (1 Corinthians 12:27; Romans 12:5)
- Scripture never calls a congregation a member of the body
- If congregations composed the body, a lost man received onto a congregation's roll would thereby be in Christ, saved by the decision of men, which is impossible
- A congregation is not in Christ; the saved people who make it up are in Christ
- A sound congregation can contain lost people, as Simon was in the church at Samaria (Acts 8:13, 23)
- To the member who feels worthless: identity is not self-assessment
- To the member who feels essential: you are one member of a body you did not assemble
- How we treat a member is how we treat Christ's body (Matthew 25:40; Acts 9:4)
- A brother is not merely someone Christ loves; he is part of Christ's own body

Discussion Prompts

- Answer "who are you?" using Paul's sentence rather than your job or family. Does it come first for you?
- If this is what the person beside you is, what changes about Monday through Saturday?
- Why does Paul say "you are" to a church behaving this badly?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking at 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 as a whole, how does this passage challenge individualism and call the church to the kind of mutual care and interdependence God designed?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Have the class gather the argument, because Paul built it carefully and they now have every piece. One body with many members. All baptized into it by God. Every part placed deliberately, as He chose. The self-doubting member cannot resign. The impressive member cannot dismiss anyone. The invisible parts are indispensable, and God Himself honors them. Division is a tear. Suffering and joy travel through the whole body automatically. And the conclusion: you are the body of Christ. Ask the class to find the space in that argument for a private, unattached Christianity. There is none.

Point out how thoroughly this dismantles the modern instinct, and be specific rather than scolding. Individualism says my faith is between me and God, and Paul says God put you in a body. It says I can worship anywhere, and Paul says a hand cannot do anything anywhere. It says I do not need the church, and Paul says the eye cannot say that to the hand. It says church is a service I attend and evaluate, and Paul says it is a body you are a part of. Every one of those instincts is answered here, not with a rule but with an anatomy lesson.

Then draw out the interdependence, because the class may hear only the rebuke. Paul is not scolding Corinth into caring more. He is telling them what they already are, and the care follows from the fact. This is why the passage does not end with a list of duties. If you actually believe you are a body, mutual care is not an obligation; it is reflex. Nobody has to be commanded to protect his own eye. The problem at Corinth was never a shortage of instructions. It was that they did not believe what they were.

Tie it back to the quarter, because this lesson is the doctrine underneath everything they have studied. Acts 2 said the Lord added them. Acts 4 said they were of one heart and soul. Acts 6 said no widow should be overlooked. Acts 15 said they would not split. All of that is 1 Corinthians 12 in motion. The church acted like a body in Acts because the church is a body, and Paul is now explaining why those chapters look the way they do.

End with the mirror, and let both questions sit. First: which are you in this passage, the foot who has quietly decided he does not belong, or the eye who has quietly decided he does not need someone? Nearly everyone is one or the other. And second, the question this whole lesson has been aiming at: if you were removed from this congregation tomorrow, what would stop working? Paul says something would. Do you believe him?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The argument leaves no room for a private, unattached Christianity
- Individualism is answered by anatomy rather than by rules
- Mutual care follows from what we are; the passage ends in identity, not a list of duties
- Corinth's problem was not a shortage of instructions but disbelief about what they were
- This doctrine underlies the whole quarter: Acts 2, 4, 6, and 15 are this passage in motion
- Nearly every Christian is either the self-excluding foot or the dismissive eye
- Every member's removal would cost the body something real

Discussion Prompts

- Which are you: the foot who decided he does not belong, or the eye who decided he does not need someone?
- If you were removed from this congregation tomorrow, what would stop working?
- Why does Paul answer individualism with an anatomy lesson instead of a command?