

Now You are the Body of Christ

(I Corinthians 12:27)

This resource is for congregational use during a time of discernment in Palo Duro Presbytery. It is recommended for use and adaptation in all congregations.
For those congregations utilizing the ongoing Bible study THE PEOPLE CALLED BY GOD, this resource contains Chapter Three: Unit 4 & 5: The Body of Christ.

GETTING STARTED

In this study resource we will explore *the biblical image of the church as the body of Christ*. This image is introduced in the letters of the apostle Paul in the New Testament. The church in the New Testament sought to understand itself in continuity with the Old Testament witness as “the People of God.” This new community remains God’s people, but it is a people newly constituted in Christ and now lives in relationship to the crucified and risen Christ. Its foundation, life, and growth can best be understood on this basis.

As used by Paul and other New Testament writers the phrase “body of Christ” is not a single expression with an unchanging meaning. These authors were responding to pastoral situations and utilized the body image in a creative manner. They drew upon various aspects of the image that were appropriate to the particular issues the early Christian communities were confronting. Part of Paul’s genius was to seize upon an image from the Greek culture and to transform it in the direction of the Jewish roots of faith, at the same time allowing these roots to grow beyond their original cultural context.

In this study we will explore the biblical image of the church as the body of Christ in four parts:

Solidarity with Christ: Through baptism and the Eucharist, believers become part of the body of Christ.

Romans 6:3-11

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

The Members of the Body: As members of the body of Christ we also become members “one of another.”

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Romans 12:1-8

The passages we shall be studying may be familiar to you. Sometimes particular texts can become so familiar that it is difficult to hear them. Thus one of our goals is to make the time and clear the space to slow down, read carefully, and

consider anew the living import of these words of Scripture for our life together in the community of faith.

The questions for reflection and discussion related to the various texts are not intended to be profound or complex, but simply to enable us to interact with the text in a straightforward manner. Use these questions as a resource for your study, but do not let them derail or block your reflection.

Throughout the study, keep in mind that the purpose of this Bible study is to explore the biblical understanding of the church, the community of faith called by God, in order to discern what God is calling your church to be and do as part of God's mission. To this end, the final section of this resource is an integrating exercise. This exercise is designed to enable your study group to pull together its insights from the Bible study and to draw out the implications for the understanding of Christian community. These insights will be valuable for shaping your own church's self-understanding as well as your life together as a community of faith communities that you know as Presbytery. You are invited at the end of this study to share your learnings about the dynamic nature of Christian community with the Transformation Team of Palo Duro Presbytery for incorporation into a Guiding Vision.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This study is designed to enable you to accomplish the following objectives:

1. to engage with other members of the congregation in Bible study;
2. to reflect upon the biblical witness concerning the identity and purpose of the church;
3. to participate in the building of Christian community through communal study, reflection, and discussion;
4. and to identify characteristics of Christian community drawn from group study and reflection on Scripture.

SOME HELPFUL NORMS

It is always helpful for a group starting out on a learning experience to clarify the norms which will guide their life together. The following norms or standards are suggested for your journey as a group. You may want, as a group, to add to the list.

1. It is OK to be informal, to call each other by first names, to create a relaxed atmosphere.
2. It is OK to take responsibility for our own learnings and not expect the group leader/facilitator to be responsible for us. Feel free to ask questions when confused and to make contributions when inspired.
3. It is OK to share a different opinion, to disagree without being disagreeable.
4. It is OK to share and test our own ideas, images, or personal experience with others in the group.
5. It is OK to practice our best active listening skills in this group. Active listening means getting involved with those who are speaking, paraphrasing their words, and checking with them to be certain that we have correctly understood them.
6. It is OK to build on the ideas of others in the group, that is, to add our own thoughts to what others have expressed in order to help an idea stretch and grow.
7. It is OK to question the ideas being proposed in the group, or in this biblical resource book, but it is also equally OK to question our ideas and assumptions.

The questions for reflection and discussion are intended to enable you to interact with the text and share your insights and concerns with one another. There is not necessarily a right or wrong answer. Some questions will be more helpful to some folks than to others. Take the questions seriously, but don't get bogged down. Let the study process be a resource as your group considers what it means to begin relating your contemporary experience of church to the biblical notion of community.

SOLIDARITY IN CHRIST

Texts: Romans 6:3-11

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Paul summarized his understanding of the human situation apart from Christ with the exclamation: "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24). He also makes clear how we are delivered from this "body of death": "You have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another" (Rom. 7:4).

In Romans 5-8 Paul contrasts the body of death (those who live in solidarity with the first human--Adam), and the body of life (those who live in solidarity with the "new human"--Jesus Christ). The two figures, Adam and Christ, can be pictured as the "inclusive representatives" of two humanities. These two bodies provide the only two solidarities open to human persons. The two are universals and they are mutually exclusive. In their inherent opposition lies the clue to the character of each. These two antitheses may be sketched as follows:¹

In Adam

All die
 Death rules all
 All sin
 Persons' bodies are
 instruments of wickedness
 The law of sin and death
 enslaves all

In Jesus Christ

All shall be made alive
 Life reigns in all
 All receive righteousness
 Persons' bodies are
 instruments of righteousness
 The law of the Spirit frees
 persons

It is the tyranny of sin and death which holds humanity in bondage that has been destroyed by Christ in his incarnation, death, and resurrection. The church, as the body of Christ, refers to those who are united in him and through him with one another. We become one body and this process is described by Paul in a variety of ways. We are baptized into his death; or crucified with him to the self, to the world, to the law of sin and death; or we participate in his body in the Eucharist.

¹ Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Westminster Press, 1960), p. 175.

Thus incorporation into the body of Christ--life in Christ--is by baptism and participation into a visible fellowship, the church in Corinth, in Rome, in the world. And our continued involvement in the life of the body is maintained by our sharing in the one loaf and the one cup in one undivided fellowship.

DYING AND RISING WITH CHRIST

Romans 6:3-11

Read Romans 6:3-11 and answer the following questions, working with another person.

1. According to this text, how are we incorporated into or united with Christ?
2. This text implies that sin is a power and not just an offense. How is that power affected by baptism?
3. What is the result of incorporation into Christ?
4. What does the triumph over death and sin "in Christ" imply about the mission of the church in the world?

Now share your answers with the others in your study group.

THIS IS MY BODY

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 and working with another person, answer the following questions.

1. What determines whether or not it is the Lord's supper that those gathered together eat?
2. According to this text, what is the purpose of the bread and cup?
3. What is required of those who wish to eat the bread or drink the cup? Why?
4. What can we learn from this text about our congregation as the body of Christ?

Now share your answers with the others in your study group.

THE MEMBERS OF THE BODY

Texts: 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Romans 12:108

The Christian experience is a social experience; a new people is created, a people whom God calls together and enriches with blessings: grace, the gifts and fruits of the Spirit, the Spirit itself, and life in Christ. There is no passive membership in the body of Christ. Every Christian is both called and equipped to serve in some way. Participation in Christ unites all Christians in a new community, and this community is united by bonds of faith, charity, and hope in a common destiny. In every possible way the new life of the Christian community stems *from* unity and tends *toward* unity. But this unity is not the uniformity of gifts, ideas, beliefs or life styles among its members. Each of these can be, in fact, quite diverse and yet still find unity in Christ. The tie which binds us together in Christian community is not sameness, but the presence of Christ in our midst.

THE BODY AND ITS MEMBERS

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

The problem of maintaining the unity of the members of the body of Christ in all its difficulty and complexity was expressed in the internal discord within the local church of Corinth. The church reflected in the New Testament was not a perfect or harmonious community. Paul's writings to the Corinthian church do not gloss over their very real difficulties, but assert that if the principle of unity is attacked, even at one point within the life of the church, the whole body is hurt. As Christians we are interconnected, in our strengths and in our weaknesses--we need each other.

1 Corinthians 12 deals with the manifestations of God's power and presence in the life and worship of the Christian community in Corinth. The community was being demoralized by the abundance of spiritual gifts, an abundance that was most apparent when the church gathered for worship. For Paul, the multitude of gifts characterized the "new" age of life in Christ, but the Corinthians tended to interpret the gifts within the context of the "old" age. Ernst Kasemann summarizes the situation:

The gift, isolated from the Giver, loses the character of a claim made by the

Lord, leads to the self-appointed leadership of those who are fundamentally undisciplined themselves, and makes the community into an arena for competing religious "gifts," a chaos which stands over against the peace of Christ as the effective presence of the old world.²

This lavish supply of gifts encouraged recipients to draw destructive distinctions among themselves and to claim for one gift preeminence over others. This produced a bedlam of sound and a competitive spirit that was destroying the fabric of unity. Some persons were even rationalizing and justifying this situation by appealing to the Holy Spirit.

We learn in this chapter of 1 Corinthians that faith in God, the confession of Christ, and inspiration by the Spirit cannot be separated from the experience of life of the community of faith. Paul's basic concern was to restore the sense of interdependence among the believers. This restoration required a true sense of their mutual relation to Christ. The image of the body expressed the reality of unity in diversity. This unity is found in the sacrificial love and service of Jesus, the saving work of God, and the gifts of the Spirit. The overall purpose is to fulfill God's purpose of reconciling the world to God's self.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 and answer the following questions working with another person.

1. What brings about unity among the members of the body?

2. How does Paul demonstrate the interdependence of the members?

² Kasemann, "Ministry and Community in the New Testament," **Essays on New Testament Themes** (Fortress Press, 1964), p. 75.

THE TRANSFORMED LIFE

Romans 12:1-8

Paul ends each of his letters with a section of very practical advice. He was not interested in abstract theological debate, but with the transformed reality of the daily lives of those who had found new life in Christ. It was his conviction that these lives had been transformed by the new relationship with Jesus Christ.

Thus, the reality for those who have died and risen with Christ is not a spiritualized and detached "religious" life, but involves whole persons offering the totality of their lives in the "worship" of God. "The exalted Christ really has an earthly body, and believers with their whole being are actually incorporated into it and therefore behave accordingly."³ This understanding does not fit easily into the values of the world, but involves a radical conversion, a transformation "by the renewal of your minds" from a self-centered to a Christ-centered life.

For Paul it is a given that the Christ-centered life is a grace-filled life. Through faith in Jesus Christ, each Christian receives and participates in God's grace (*charis*) which is manifested in a gift of grace (*charism*). The gift of grace expresses itself in a specific function in and for the church, the body of Christ. God's grace is not a general orientation, a "package deal," but is manifested in the form of specific gifts. The grace and goodness of God is realized in the concrete ways in which gifts are identified, recognized, and utilized on behalf of the whole. Grace is "not ours as an inalienable possession or as a property of our inner life but only as the energy of service and as calling."⁴

Thus gift and task are never separable in Paul. The giver is the Lord; his claim upon us is always united with the gift of grace. The new life in Christ is participation in the earthly body of the risen Christ, and this participation is not passive or individualistic. Rather, participation in Christ recognizes and uses specific and unique gifts given to the various members for the upbuilding of the

³ Ernst Kasemann, "The Theological Problem Presented by the Motif of the Body of Christ," in **Perspectives on Paul** (Fortress Press, 1971), p. 104.

⁴ Ernst Kasemann, "Worship and Everyday Life," in **New Testament Questions of Today** (Fortress Press, 1969), p. 193.

INTEGRATING EXERCISE: THE BODY OF CHRIST

Our goal in the study of *biblical images of the church* is to explore the biblical understanding of the people called and empowered by God to accomplish God's purposes. And the study of the *biblical understanding of the church as the body of Christ* is to enable us to discern God's call and God's will for the contemporary church.

Reviewing your notes from the discussions above, jot down the insights you have received from the study of the New Testament image of the church as the body of Christ:

1. DYING AND RISING WITH CHRIST (Romans 6:3-11). What does the triumph over death and sin "in Christ" imply about the mission of the church in the world?
2. THIS IS MY BODY (1 Corinthians 11:17-34). What can we learn from the Lord's Supper about the church as the body of Christ?
3. THE BODY AND ITS MEMBERS (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). How does the image of the body of Christ in I Corinthians 12 stimulate your vision for the life of your congregation? ...for the life of your presbytery?
4. THE TRANSFORMED LIFE (Romans 12:1-8). Why do we need one another in a congregation? Why do we (a congregation) need one another in a community of communities such as a presbytery?

After you have made notes of your learnings, share your insights and learnings with one another. Appoint someone in the group to write down what is shared by the group in response to the questions in the Integrating Exercise. It is OK to share a range of responses. Consensus is not necessary. Send your group response to: Transformation Team Vision Panel at Palo Duro Presbytery, PO Box 16267, Lubbock, TX 79490-6267 by 01 October 2007.