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“Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” (Romans 12.4 – 5)

Introduction

In our studies in Romans 12 we are now going on to look at verses 4 to 8 where he the apostle applies the principle of humility which he spoke of in verse 3 to the matter of church life. We see the logic in this. There is nothing more important in this world than the church of Jesus Christ. Therefore it is vitally important that as Christians we correctly understand what the church is, and how we are to fulfil our role in it.

The passage divides naturally into two halves. In the first half, verses 4 and 5, the apostle gives teaching about the nature of the church as the body of Christ, and shows how each member has a vital role to play. In the second half, verses 6 to 8, he speaks about spiritual gifts, and urges each one to use his or her gifts for the good of the whole.

I intend for us today to concentrate on verses 4 and 5, and I hope, God willing, for us to return to the passage and to consider verses 6 to 8 next week. I want us to see from verses 4 and 5 what the apostle teaches about the church, and then to see how this should apply to our lives as Christians.

Teaching about the church

First of all then, let us see from this passage what the apostle says about the church. There are four things we can learn about the church, and those who are

part of the church, from these verses.

1) Members of the church of Christ are those who are "in" Christ

Paul says, "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so **in Christ** we who are many form one body,"

Those who are true believers are "in Christ". Something supernatural has happened. They were previously "in Adam". They belonged to the old human race which was doomed to destruction. But now they have been joined to Christ, they are "in Christ". This means that all that has happened to Christ has happened to them already, or will happen to them in the future. Christ died. True believers have died with Christ. Their old life is finished. Christ was raised from the dead. True believers have been raised up spiritually, and given new life. Christ was exalted. True believers have been raised up with Christ, and seated "with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2.6). Christ will come again in glory, and when he comes the bodies of true believers will be raised up, and shall "appear with him in glory" (Colossians 3.4).

So we see that a true Christian is not merely someone who has been "Christened" as a baby. Nor yet is he someone who merely "goes to church". Nor again is he merely someone who says he believes that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that he died for sinners. A true Christian is someone who has been joined to Christ.

This is also the same thing as what Jesus spoke about when he talked with Nicodemus. He said to Nicodemus, "You must be born again." Nicodemus was a religious man, well respected amongst the Jews. But he lacked something vital. He had not been born again. When a person is born again he is united with Christ in his death, and raised again with Christ to a new life.

Let me ask you this question before we go any further: Have you been joined to Christ? Can it be truly said of you that you are "in" him? Have you been born again? If the answer to these questions is "no" then you are not a Christian. At this point in time you do not have eternal life, and you are on your way to Hell. You are not part of the church of Jesus Christ. You need urgently to seek God in prayer and ask him to work in you the miracle of the rebirth.

2) Members of the church of Christ are joined to all other members

The next truth we see from these verses is that true believers have been joined to all other true believers. “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and **each member belongs to all the others.**”

If you are a true Christian, you have been joined to Christ. But so have all other true believers. So if you have been joined to Christ you have been joined to his people, and his people have been joined to you. The same miraculous work of God which has joined you to Christ, has, by the same token, joined you to his church. “For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Corinthians 12.13). It is God who adds people to his church, as and when he sees fit. “The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:47).

Therefore, if you are a true believer, just as you have been joined to Christ, so have all the rest of his people been joined to Christ. So if you are joined to Christ you have also been joined to his people. “In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” We belong to each other. We cannot hive off from other believers and do our own thing. That would be a complete denial of what God has done for us. Just as, if you are a true Christian, you can never be separated from Christ, so, if you belong to Christ, you can never be separated from his body, the church.

3) The church is a body of people

This leads us to the third thing we see from these verses, that the church is the body of those people who belong to Christ. “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ **we who are many form one body**, and each member belongs to all the others.”

This tells us something very important about the church. The church is not an institution, with popes, bishops and rectors. It is not a human organisation with buildings, investments, committees and so on. The true church is a body of people who have been saved by the blood of Christ.

This is evident by the very Greek word which is translated “church”. It is perhaps unfortunate that our translations use the word “church” because of its connotations with the human organisations that call themselves “churches” like the “Roman Catholic Church” or the “Church of England” or the “Church of Scotland”. The original Greek word which is translated “church” means quite simply an “assembly” or “gathering”. It is used in Acts 19.41 to describe the riotous assembly that gathered in the amphitheatre in Ephesus to complain against the teaching of the apostle Paul. That is what the church is, an assembly, or gathering, of the people of God.

The word is used in two ways in the New Testament. It is used to describe the assembly of all true believers who have ever lived and who ever will live. So for example, Paul says in Ephesians 5.25 and 26 that Christ “loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word”. The church in this sense is an assembly of people which will only take place on that glorious day when Jesus comes again, and all God’s people from all places and from all time will be gathered together. Sometimes people call the assembly of all believers in all time the “universal” church, or the “invisible” church, because this assembly is invisible to us in this world, although visible to God.

The other way in which the word is used in the New Testament is when it is used to speak of local churches, local assemblies, of God’s people. So for example Paul writes to the “to the church of God in Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1.2). We show that we are part of the universal church, or assembly, of Christ by being part of a local church, or assembly.

Note that the apostle says that we are all part of one body. There is only one true church of Jesus Christ. Different local congregations have felt it necessary to adopt denominational labels which summarise their convictions on different matters, but the true church of Jesus Christ, consisting of all true believers, is one church. It is to be hoped that in due course, as true believers grow together in their understanding of Scripture, denominational differences between true believers will become a thing of the past.

4) Each member of the church is different but needed

Here again what the apostle says, “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members **do not all have the same function**, so in Christ

we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." We who are believers are all part of the same body, but we are not all the same! We have different functions.

The apostle draws an analogy from the human body. In the human body there are many different organs. An organ is a collection of cells which perform a specific function. Your skin is an organ. It performs the function of keeping in the body fluids, and keeping out harmful microbes. Your lungs are an organ. They perform the function of absorbing oxygen into the body and releasing Carbon Dioxide out of the body. Your kidneys are another organ. They have the function of removing from the blood stream excess water and urea. If your kidneys stop working you will die, unless you are able to have artificial dialysis. And so we could go on. Each of these organs is very different. Skin is very different from lungs. Lungs are very different from kidneys. But each performs a vital role in keeping the whole body healthy. And each needs the other.

If our organs were able to talk, it would be absurd for one of them to say, "I do not need the other parts of the body." Equally, it would be absurd for an organ to say "The rest of the body does not need me." Each one is needed.

All true believers are joined together in the body of Christ. The local church is a miniature expression of the universal, invisible church. It is in the local church that we are to fulfil our role in the body of Christ. If you are a Christian you have a vital role to play in your local church.

Application

So this, then, is a brief summary of the teaching of these verses. Now I wish to bring out some applications from what the apostle says. There is much that could be said, and some more will be brought out next week when we think about exercising spiritual gifts. But for now I wish to bring out three applications:

1) We must meet together

The first, and what should be most obvious, thing that proceeds from what we have seen is that we must meet together. If we have been brought, supernaturally, into the church, the assembly of God's people, then we must

demonstrate that we are part of that assembly by meeting with, and sharing in the life of, a local church, a local assembly.

Now I say that this should be completely obvious, yet it is quite alarming how many people profess to be Bible-believing Christians, saved only by faith in Christ, who have almost nothing to do with his church. They say things like, "You don't have to go to church to pray" "I can listen to sermons at home." "I love Jesus. It's church I have a problem with." "The church is full of hypocrites." I have sometimes talked with such people and asked them about their spiritual health, and sometimes they have assured me that they have "never been stronger" as Christians and that they are "full of the Holy Spirit," even though they are not meeting with God's people. I venture to suggest that a person who speaks in such terms about his spiritual life, while not meeting with God's people, is self-deceived about his spiritual state, and not only is he not full of the Holy Spirit, but he may well be not converted at all.

If you need to be persuaded that being involved in a local church is an essential ingredient of healthy Christian living, think of what happened following the conversion of 3,000 people on the day of Pentecost. What did the new converts do following their conversion? Did they all go off in their separate ways and live out their Christian lives privately, not having anything to do with each other? Not at all! They shared rich fellowship together.

Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:41 - 47).

Then think of what happened as the Gospel spread out through the Roman Empire. Wherever Paul and the other apostles went, as they preached and people were converted, what did they do? They gathered the converts into churches. So we see that this teaching shows us that we must find a local church which is true to the Gospel and meet with it.

2) We should be committed to one local church

Secondly, we should be committed to one local church.

If the local church is an expression, in miniature, of the body of Christ, then the normal pattern must be for us to remain part of one particular church. With advances of modern science it has become possible to transplant an organ from one person to another, but it is a difficult and risky procedure, and it takes a long time for someone who has received a transplanted organ to regain full strength. So a believer may sometimes need to move church. Perhaps he has to move house to a new area for family or work reasons. Perhaps he believes God has called him to serve in a new area. But moving church is a risky business. It can take a very long time to find another church where one is comfortable, and to get to the point where one is fully involved in the new church.

I am sure many of us will have met spiritual nomads. They meet with the church for a while. At first they are full of enthusiasm, and make many favourable comparisons with the church they have come from. But before long something is said to them that causes offence, and they up and go as suddenly as they arrived. What is wrong with being a spiritual nomad? You never have a chance to grow up properly as a Christian. People are just getting to know you well enough to point out your faults and you are off on your travels. And you never have an opportunity to get really involved in the ministry of a church.

Of course, every church has its weaknesses. If you are aware of weakness in the church of which you are a part, the first thing you should do is to pray for that church. It may also be good for you to speak with the elders of the church about the weakness that you perceive.

Often the problem that people have with a church boils down to one or more individuals with whom they cannot get on. The answer in such a situation is not to leave the church but to go and see the individual concerned and seek to sort out with him or her what the problem is.

3) We must seek to maintain Christian unity

Thirdly, we should seek to maintain Christian unity. The wonderful thing about being a true Christian is that you are one with all other true believers. We share the same Lord, the same experience of salvation from sin, the same gift of the

Holy Spirit, the same union with Christ in his death and resurrection, the same hope of glory. We are part of the one church of Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, although we are one, we need to watch out because the devil can seek to sow division between us and cause a breakdown in relationships between believers. The devil knows that if he can bring this about it will bring shame on the name of Christ and weaken the cause of the Gospel in the world. So the apostle Paul says, "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4.2 – 3). There is a unity of the Spirit. But it needs to be kept "through the bond of peace." We need to make sure that we are at peace with each other. If someone upsets you by something he or she says or does, go and speak with him or her about it. And if you know that you have, perhaps without meaning to, upset someone else, go and speak with him about it. Jesus said, "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5.23 – 24).

Conclusion

We have speaking about the most glorious thing in the world. It is the one thing that will survive from this world to the next: the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. As we finish let me ask you again this question: are you part of the church of Jesus Christ? Have you been born again? If not, you are outside of the people of God. You are missing out of the most glorious and wonderful body of people the world has ever seen. I urge you to come to Christ. Ask him to save you from your sin, and to cause you to be born again. Let him join you to him and to his people.

Maybe you are a true Christian. Perhaps you have asked Christ to save you, and you are not relying on your works to bring you to God. If this is the case, may I ask you this: are you taking your proper place as part of Christ's church? I have tried to show you that you cannot be part of Christ without being part of his people. Have you realised this? Are you knitted into the people of God in a local church? Are you meeting with the church regularly? If you have been slack in meeting with your local church, repent! Be at every meeting. Share fellowship with the members. Get involved in the work of the church.

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