

The Body of Christ, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 3: One Body, Many Members

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

The central doctrine of this lesson is the nature of the church as the one body of Christ, composed of many different but mutually necessary members, arranged by God Himself. Paul is correcting a divided, status-conscious congregation, and his correction comes through this image: the church is an organism, not an organization; a body, not a crowd. What is at stake doctrinally is the unity and interdependence of the body against both pride and individualism. No member can be dismissed ("I have no need of you"), and no member can withdraw as unnecessary ("I do not belong"). God placed each one.

This lesson contains a passage that requires careful handling: the spiritual gifts named in chapters 12 and 14, including prophecy, tongues, and miraculous healings. Be ready to teach that these miraculous gifts belonged to the apostolic age, when revelation was being confirmed before the New Testament was complete. Paul himself says in 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 that prophecy, tongues, and such knowledge were partial and would cease "when the perfect comes," that is, when the complete and mature revelation arrived. With the New Testament now complete, these confirming sign gifts have served their purpose and ceased (compare 2 Timothy 3:16-17). Teach this without rancor, and then move quickly to the abiding point, which Paul himself emphasizes: the unity and mutual care of the body. The heaviest doctrinal block (Q9) is best spent not on the gifts but on the God-designed interdependence that is the passage's lasting message.

The formational aim is to help each student find his or her place in the body, between two ditches. On one side is the proud member who feels self-sufficient and looks down on others. On the other is the discouraged member who feels useless and wonders whether he belongs. Paul speaks tenderly to both. Your aim is to lead the proud to humble dependence and the discouraged to confident belonging, and to help the whole class feel the wonder of a body so joined that one member's pain is felt by all and one member's joy is shared by all. This is not sentiment; it is the design of Christ for His people.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul writes, "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" (v. 12). What does it mean that the church is not merely organized like a body but is the one body of Christ, and how does that image shape the way we should think about division and individualism?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul's statement in verse 12 is startling. He does not say the church is like the body of Christ; he says "so it is with Christ." The church is so closely united to Jesus that Paul can name the body by the name of its head. To touch the church is to touch Christ (compare Acts 9:4).

Draw out the two truths held together: the body is one, and the body has many members. Neither cancels the other. Unity does not erase difference, and difference does not destroy unity. This is the answer to both the divisive and the individualistic spirit at Corinth.

Apply this against division. If the church is one body, then schism is not merely unfortunate; it is an attempt to tear apart Christ Himself (1 Corinthians 1:13). Paul's whole letter fights against the party spirit that fractures the body.

Apply it also against individualism. Western Christians especially are tempted to treat faith as a private matter between the individual and God. But the body image makes belonging essential, not optional. A Christian is a member of something, joined to others by design.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The church as the one body of Christ, united to Him as its head.
- Unity and diversity held together, not played against each other.
- Division as an assault on the body of Christ.
- The error of private, individualistic Christianity.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between saying the church is like a body and saying it is Christ's body?
- How does the body image confront both division and individualism?
- Why can no Christian rightly live as a solitary member?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul says some members feel like a foot wishing it were a hand, as if they do not really belong (vv. 15–16). When have you felt that way in the church, and what does Paul's answer, "that would not make it any less a part of the body," say to that feeling?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question follows the discouraged member of verses 15 and 16, the foot wishing it were a hand, the ear wishing it were an eye. Paul gives voice to a feeling many carry quietly: I am not really needed here.

Help students name where that feeling comes from. Often it is comparison. We measure our gift against someone more visible and conclude we do not matter. Paul says the comparison is beside the point: “that would not make it any less a part of the body.”

Stress that belonging is not based on visibility or applause. The unseen parts of a body are often the most vital. God’s arrangement, not our self-assessment, determines our place.

Move toward confident belonging. The discouraged member does not need to become someone else; he needs to believe what God says about him: you are a part of the body, placed here on purpose.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The discouraged member who feels he does not belong.
- Comparison as the root of feeling useless.
- Belonging grounded in God’s arrangement, not visibility.
- Confident belonging as the cure for discouragement.

Discussion Prompts

- When have you felt like a foot wishing it were a hand in the church?
- How does comparison feed the sense that we do not matter?
- What does it change to hear God say you are a part of the body on purpose?

Question 3

Student Question:

In verse 13 Paul says, “in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.” How does a person come to be in this one body, and why does Paul point back to baptism as the moment of entrance into it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 13 is a doctrinal anchor: “in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.” Paul roots membership in the body in baptism, consistent with the rest of the New Testament (Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3–4).

Connect this to Lesson 2. The same baptism in which sins are forgiven and the Lord adds the saved is the baptism into the one body. There is no entrance into the body apart from being baptized into Christ.

Clarify “in one Spirit.” The Spirit works through the gospel and the new birth (Titus 3:5; John 3:5). Baptism is not a merely human ceremony; it is the Spirit-appointed point of entrance into the body, where God does the uniting.

Note the unifying force of “all” and “one.” Jews and Greeks, slave and free, all baptized into one body. The very entrance into the church levels the divisions the Corinthians prized. We come in the same way, into the same body.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Baptism into the one body (1 Corinthians 12:13).
- The unity of entrance: all baptized into one body, regardless of background.
- The Spirit’s work through the gospel and the new birth.
- The link between baptism for forgiveness and baptism into the body.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul point back to baptism when teaching about the body?
- How does entrance into the body level the divisions the Corinthians prized?
- How does this connect to what we saw about entering the church in Acts 2?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul warns the eye against saying to the hand, “I have no need of you” (v. 21). Where are you tempted to look down on other members of the body, or to act as though you could get along just fine without them?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question follows the proud member of verse 21: the eye saying to the hand, “I have no need of you.” If the last self question addressed discouragement, this one addresses pride and self-sufficiency.

Help students see the subtle forms of “I have no need of you.” It is not usually said out loud. It shows up in dismissing certain members, in cliques, in valuing the gifted and ignoring the ordinary, in thinking we could thrive spiritually with no one’s help.

Press the truth that need is built into the body by design. To say we do not need others is to claim an independence God never gave. The eye truly cannot function without the hand.

Aim for humility in action: a relationship to value, a member to stop overlooking, a willingness to receive help rather than only give it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The proud member who looks down on others.
- Subtle forms of “I have no need of you” in church life.
- God-designed need and interdependence among members.

- Humility expressed in valuing and receiving from others.

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to act as though you do not need other members?
- What are the quiet ways we say “I have no need of you”?
- What would it look like to receive from a member you tend to overlook?

Question 5

Student Question:

God “arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose” (v. 18), and gave greater honor to the parts that seemed to lack it (vv. 23–24). What does this teach about who is responsible for the makeup of the body, and how does it correct both pride and envy among members?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is a doctrinal block centered on God’s sovereignty in composing the body. Three times Paul stresses that God arranged the members: “God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose” (v. 18), and God gave greater honor to the parts that lacked it (vv. 23–24).

Draw out that the makeup of the body is God’s doing, not ours and not the members’ own. We do not assign ourselves our place, nor do we get to wish the body were composed differently. God chose.

Show how this corrects pride. If God arranged the body, then no member can boast, for his place and gift are gifts. “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Corinthians 4:7).

Show how it corrects envy and discouragement. If God arranged the body, then no member is a mistake or an afterthought. The very parts that seem weaker or less honorable are given special honor by God’s design (vv. 22–24).

Apply it to the local congregation. The particular mix of people God has placed in a church, with all their differences, is His arrangement. We are not free to despise the body God has given us or to wish it were a different body.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God’s sovereign arrangement of the members of the body.
- Pride corrected: our place and gifts are received, not earned.
- Envy corrected: no member is a mistake or an afterthought.
- Special honor given by God to the parts that seem weaker.
- The local congregation as God’s arrangement, to be received, not despised.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that God arranged each member as He chose?
- How does God's arrangement of the body undercut both pride and envy?
- How should we view the particular mix of people in our congregation?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul says God arranged you, specifically, in the body as He chose. If you took seriously that God placed you in this congregation on purpose, with something to contribute, what might change about how you show up and serve?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question presses God's arrangement into personal calling. If God placed you in this body on purpose, then your presence is not accidental and your contribution is not optional.

Help students move from passivity to purpose. Many attend the church as recipients only. But a member placed by God has something to offer, some service that the body needs and that no one else will give in quite the same way.

Address the excuses: too busy, not gifted enough, someone else will do it. The body image answers each. A hand cannot excuse itself from being a hand because the foot is more visible.

Aim for one concrete way to show up and serve, named and scheduled, not left as a good intention.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's placement of each member as a personal calling.
- The move from passive attender to active member.
- Excuses that keep members from serving.
- Concrete service as the response to being placed on purpose.

Discussion Prompts

- If God placed you here on purpose, how might that change how you show up?
- What contribution might the body need from you specifically?
- What is one concrete way you could begin to serve?

Question 7

Student Question:

The surrounding chapters list spiritual gifts including prophecy, tongues, and miraculous healing. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:8–13 that such gifts were partial and would pass away “when the perfect comes.” How should we understand the place of those miraculous gifts, and what is the abiding teaching of this passage for the church today?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question requires careful, calm teaching about the miraculous spiritual gifts. The surrounding chapters (12 and 14) discuss prophecy, tongues, miraculous knowledge, and gifts of healing. These were real and Spirit-given in the apostolic age. The question is whether they continue today.

Teach the purpose of these gifts. They served to reveal and confirm the word of God before the New Testament was complete (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3–4). They were the scaffolding by which God delivered and confirmed the gospel in the first generation.

Walk through 1 Corinthians 13:8–13. Paul plainly says prophecy, tongues, and such knowledge are partial and “will pass away.” They belong to the time of partial revelation, “for we know in part and we prophesy in part.” But “when the perfect comes,” the partial passes away. The “perfect” or complete is the full, mature revelation that the partial gifts were delivering, now possessed in the completed New Testament.

State the conclusion clearly and without harshness: the confirming sign gifts, having accomplished their purpose, have ceased. We now have the complete and all-sufficient word (2 Timothy 3:16–17). This guards against claims of present-day new revelation, continuing apostleship, or miraculous sign gifts, which our study consistently denies.

Then turn deliberately to the abiding application, which is Paul’s own emphasis. The lasting lesson of the chapter is not the gifts but the body: its unity, its diversity, its mutual care. Do not let the class spend the whole hour on cessation; spend the weight of it on the love and interdependence that never pass away (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The purpose of miraculous gifts: to reveal and confirm the word (Hebrews 2:3–4).
- Miraculous gifts as belonging to the age of partial revelation (1 Corinthians 13:8–13).
- “When the perfect comes”: the completed, mature revelation.
- The cessation of confirming sign gifts with the completed New Testament.
- The all-sufficiency of Scripture today (2 Timothy 3:16–17).
- The abiding application: unity and mutual care that never pass away.

Discussion Prompts

- What purpose did the miraculous gifts serve in the early church?
- How does 1 Corinthians 13:8–13 help us understand the place of those gifts?

- Why is it important that the lasting point of the chapter is the body's love, not the gifts?

Question 8

Student Question:

Verse 26 says, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together." Whose suffering in the body have you been slow to feel as your own, and whose honor have you found hard to rejoice in? What would it look like to let their pain and joy become yours?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question follows verse 26, the body's shared feeling: "if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together." This is the test of whether we truly live as one body.

Press the first half gently. Whose suffering have we kept at arm's length? It is possible to hear of a brother's grief or struggle and feel nothing, to treat the body's pain as someone else's problem.

Press the second half, which is often harder. Rejoicing in another's honor is difficult when envy is at work. To rejoice when a fellow member is praised, blessed, or promoted is a real victory of love over self.

Aim for a concrete movement of sympathy or shared joy: a suffering member to draw near to, an honored member to genuinely celebrate.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Shared suffering and shared joy as marks of the one body.
- The temptation to keep others' pain at arm's length.
- Envy as the enemy of rejoicing in another's honor.
- Sympathy and celebration as concrete acts of body life.

Discussion Prompts

- Whose suffering in the body have you been slow to feel as your own?
- Whose honor do you find hard to rejoice in, and why?
- What would it look like to let their pain and joy become yours this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul's deepest point is that the body's unity is not uniformity but interdependence: God composed the body so that "there may be no division" but rather mutual care (vv. 24–25). Why

does God design the body around difference and need rather than sameness, and how does this expose both the proud member who feels self-sufficient and the discouraged member who feels worthless?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block, and it is best spent on the heart of the passage: God's design of the body around difference and need. Paul says God composed the body, giving greater honor to the inferior part, "that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another" (vv. 24-25).

Make the key point: God built the body around interdependence on purpose. He did not make a body of identical parts but of different parts that need each other. Need is not a flaw in the body; it is the design that holds it together.

Show how this exposes the proud, self-sufficient member. To feel that you need no one is to reject the very design of the body. God arranged things so that no member can stand alone.

Show how it also exposes the discouraged, worthless-feeling member. To feel that you contribute nothing is to deny that God gave you a necessary place. The body is built so that every part is needed.

Lift the class to wonder. This is not mere organization; it is the genius of God. He made His people to flourish only together, so that love would be necessary and unity would be the air the body breathes. The cure for both pride and discouragement is the same: see the body as God designed it, and take your place in it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's intentional design of the body around difference and need.
- Interdependence, not uniformity, as the basis of unity.
- The proud, self-sufficient member exposed by the design of the body.
- The discouraged, worthless-feeling member answered by the design of the body.
- Mutual care as the purpose for which God composed the body.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God design the body around difference and need rather than sameness?
- How does God's design expose the self-sufficient member?
- How does the same design comfort the member who feels worthless?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across 1 Corinthians 12:12–27. Having seen that you are a necessary, God-placed member of the one body of Christ, name one specific way Jesus is calling you to take your place, either by offering what you have been holding back or by receiving what you have been too proud to need.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the capstone, drawing the whole passage toward a personal step. The lesson has placed each student somewhere between pride and discouragement, and Paul's word to both is the same: you are a necessary, God-placed member of the one body.

Tailor the response to the student. For the one who has been holding back a gift out of fear or false humility, the step is to offer it. For the one who has been too proud or self-sufficient to need others, the step is to receive.

Resist vague resolutions. The aim is one specific, nameable action: a service to begin, a member to draw near, help to ask for, a division to refuse.

Close on the wonder of belonging to Christ's body. To be a member is to be joined to Christ and to His people, needed and needing, in a living organism animated by His Spirit. Invite the class to take their place in it gladly.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Taking one's God-given place in the body.
- Offering a gift held back out of fear or false humility.
- Receiving help out of humility rather than self-sufficiency.
- The wonder of belonging to the living body of Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- What is one specific way Jesus is calling you to take your place in the body?
- Is your step to offer what you have held back, or to receive what you have resisted?
- What is the first move, and when will you make it?