



## Trickle Down Missionomics

### 1 Corinthians 12:12-26

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Two weeks ago, we began a new worship series that we're calling *The Quest*. Over this eight week focus, we are looking at who God created the church to be, and asking ourselves, how must we be structured today to live into that purpose for the Church? As a quick recap, two weeks ago we used the Pentecost Story in Acts 2 to name that, at its rawest moment – in that moment the Spirit was first gifted and the Church took its formation, the 11 disciples huddled in that closed room were driven out into the community to speak in ways they could only speak because of the empowerment of the Spirit. They were driven out into the community to connect with others, with the rest of the community, and they proclaimed God's goodness to all who would listen.

At the most foundational level, that is why we exist as the Church: to go out into the world and to proclaim the goodness of God's power and love.

Last week, in our 170<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration, we named that we have not always had this purpose as the focus of our work. That at times, over the past 170 years, we have gotten it wrong. Naming our failures is part of our celebration, because it reminds us that, even when we have gotten it wrong, God has continued to redeem us, and to call us to new life.

In our 170<sup>th</sup> year, and looking at the years to come, the question we now ask is, how do we live in to a more faithful future to celebrates God's gift, and honors God's call? What does it look like for us to live in to that new life that God has gifted us to fulfill God's purpose for the Church – to be engaged in the community proclaiming God's goodness?

After God's vision is laid out in the gifting of the Spirit at Pentecost, we begin to see Paul writing to these new faith communities about how they should be structured and organized to live into God's purpose for the Church. As we named a couple weeks ago, Paul is not trying to change God's vision – Paul is writing to help these first churches live into God's vision. And that is where we encounter our text in 1 Corinthians 12 today. Paul is writing to the newly formed church in Corinth and is offering guidance on how to live more fully as a body – as a people – as a Church into this goal of engaging in the community to proclaim God's goodness.

Not everything Paul says is applicable in direct ways, because Paul was writing to a 1<sup>st</sup> Century congregation that was still dealing within a cultural realm that subjugated women, that utilized slavery, that was largely agricultural, and ... well, you know, didn't have the kind of scientific, technologic, or general knowledge we have today.

But 1 Corinthians 12 offers a foundational tenant of who God has created us to be. It's hard to argue that this text is cultural in its application, and is generally just a good exposition on the nature of the Church.

In describing the Church, Paul uses this vision of a body. Paul says the body is made up of many members. This physiological definition is then applied to the Church, which Paul metaphorically calls "the body of Christ." He says the Church is the body of Christ, and we are all members of it. Then, listen to what he says, he's affirming God's purpose at Pentecost, he says, "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we are all made to drink of one Spirit." He's making it clear, that Spirit is still that which drives us – the Spirit is still that which empowers us – the Spirit is still that which makes our work as the Church possible and leads us in the path God desires, to be present in the community proclaiming the goodness of God in the world.

He uses this metaphor in some detail to explain how the body of Christ operates. He says that every member of the body is important; every member of the body has an important role to play. There is no single member that is more important than the other. In fact, Paul says, the members who are seen to be the weakest are the ones who are to be treated with the most respect.

In application, we then have to wonder, what does it look like for the Church to be set up in such a way that we can live in to what Paul is saying, while still focusing on God's call for the Church? How do we structure ourselves in such a way that we can honor even those who may seem to be the least significant?

In the early days of the Church, in these early communities to whom Paul was speaking, what we found was that the Church was structured into small groups. There weren't a lot of people in these meetings, partly because Christianity was still being persecuted by the Roman government who ruled the Mediterranean region. They had to meet in small groups to protect themselves and remain unnoticed by the oppressive Roman regime.

These small groups functioned as churches. And they did exactly what God desired – they went into the communities surrounding their churches and engaged with the community in ways that proclaimed God's goodness, even though they were at risk of persecution and death for doing so. Over the coming centuries, as Christianity was adopted by the Roman empire as the state religion, the structure of these early churches dissipated. In their place, we saw the formation of the denominational structure of Catholicism, and the many branches of Christianity that would follow. In the structuring of the church, the church took on the hierarchy of the empire that claimed the religion as its own. In so doing, the individual – the individual members of the body – were to an extent limited in their participation.

During the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries, we saw the rise of Protestantism, largely in protest of the Catholic Church. One of the tenants of Protestantism is what Martin Luther called, *the priesthood of all believers*. This idea reclaimed Paul's articulation in 1 Corinthians 12,

saying that everyone who is part of the church should be playing a part in the proclamation of God's goodness in the world. Luther, and those who followed him, said it's not just the preachers or public theologians, the Popes or the Bishops, who are called to participate in the ministerial life of the church. This idea that we are all valued went against the idea that saints and priests needed to serve as mediators between God and the people, but that we all have direct access to speak to and be in relationship with God.

John Wesley, in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, maintained this claim and upheld the Protestant belief in the priesthood of all believers. In the formation of the Methodist movement, Wesley called lay people into meetings groups that were quite reminiscent of the first churches following the gifting of the Spirit at Pentecost. In fact, Wesley was known for saying clergy should not be a part of these meetings, that their presence was unnecessary. He believed that all laity seeking God's guidance could find it in the accountability and support of the community of faith.

These small groups – or class meetings as Wesley called them – led the growth of the Methodist movement in America in the last 1700s. Other denominational groups saw a similar growth because, in the structuring of this land under European descendants, it was these small communities and small group gatherings that led the way for American religion. Yet, as America began to become more industrialized in the 1800s, we saw a shift take place in the way the church operated. In small towns that became small cities, these church groups began to grow. As they grew, they turned their small meeting houses into sanctuaries. Their sanctuaries were given a steeple, and the race for the tallest steeple began. When new people moved into town, they went to the church with the tallest steeple, and so the churches shifted their priority from these small group meetings to church-building. There was still a desire to proclaim God's goodness, but it's questionable as to which focus was the driving factor.

In this church-steeple race, American Protestantism began to take on the denominational structures that had been rejected of Catholicism in the Reformation. The focus of Paul's teaching on the church as the body, which claimed every person was of importance, and led the movement of the early church in the Mediterranean, and led the movement of the early church in America, took a back burner to the structure building of the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the entirety of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

What we saw from the early 1800s, and is still prevalent in the church today, is a model of church that looks like this:

We saw small churches popping up, first as small groups meetings in people's homes, but then constructing official brick-and-mortar buildings. As other church buildings were built in town, the churches tried to add more space, and a taller steeple. They wanted to attract more church-goers. Instead of continually driving ourselves out into the community, you know, like Acts 2 demonstrated, we focused on driving people into the church. More and more people meant bigger and bigger buildings. Eventually, our building had so many people that we needed to figure out how to structure the church to live into this bigger reality. So, instead of having

circuit riding preachers who came by once every month to offer communion and baptize a few babies, we started calling pastors to serve individual churches.

Only, these pastors had never been trained to run an organization before. I don't know what you think they teach us in seminary, but I assure, in the 1800s, these pastors weren't learning property maintenance or financial organization.

So, to help these fast-growing churches have some organizational structure, we started setting up committees to run the administrative part of the church. You know, to do all those things we pastors aren't trained to do. We set up the trustees, and the finance committee, and the staff-parish relations committee, and the endowment committee, and the Church Council ... and as churches continued to grow, we set up a children's ministry committee, and a youth ministry committee, and a missional endeavors committee, and a potluck committee (ok, that probably came much sooner than the missional endeavors committee), and an adult education committee, and a preschool committee, and a technology committee ... I could keep going, because for real, there are churches who have 15 to 20, if not more, committees that run the full life of the church.

Only, the committees were made up of volunteer laity. Eventually, the committees said, we can't do this on our own. We all have jobs, and families, and other responsibilities – we need other paid staff to help do all the things we believe we're supposed to be doing. So we hired professional staff to run the children's ministry, and we hired professional staff to run the music ministry, and we hired professional staff to lead our missions ministry, and we hire professional staff to lead our Christian education programming.

With the pastors giving the orders, and the committees trying to organize how to live that out, and the staff believing their job was contingent on them creating and running programming within the church, what we saw next was the formation of small groups and missional projects. We had all these grand visions of what we were supposed to be doing from our clergy, committees, and staff, that we had to put these into practice. So at the direction of these leaders, we formed small groups and went on mission trips. All of this required more people – we wanted more people in our small groups that the Christian Educator said were necessary – and we wanted more people in our mission trip that the Missions Board said were necessary – so we created outreach events to bring in more people to the church to fill our small groups and mission trips ...

The problem with this whole structure is that it places the community at the very bottom of why the church exists, and it deemphasizes anyone not serving in leadership. It's as if the community – the people who live in the community around the church – exist only to fill the roles when the church isn't big enough to do it themselves, and as if the members of the body only exist to do what the leadership believes is important. This is just the opposite of what God shows us is the purpose of the Church at Pentecost and what Paul proclaims is the example of the body of Christ.

So what does it look like when we keep the first things first? What does the Church look like when we are structured, not off our desire to grow, but off of God's proclamation and witness in the Spirit that our priority is to go forth into the world – while holding Paul's vision in mind that every member of the church is of equal importance?

Well, the first thing is that the community is not at the bottom, but at the top of our structure. The community is the focus of God's gifting the Spirit, and is that which drives the work of the Church.

The Church then, we, the people of the body of Christ, are then the connecting points with the community. Paul says, we are all part of the work, for we all have been gifted the Spirit. This is the vision of the priesthood of all believers that in part defines our identity as protestants. Every one of you is gifted by God to proclaim God's goodness in the world; every one of you is gifted to be God's presence of love in the lives of those you encounter; every one of you is gifted to share in the work of God in the world.

Here's what happens when we are all faithfully living into this vision of the body – when we are all living out our part in engaging with the community around us in faithful ways ...

In our engagement with the world around us, we acknowledge we have the need for small groups because either 1) we don't know enough of God's goodness to proclaim it in the world and we need to educate ourselves, 2) we acknowledge that we have a need for support and accountability from one another in our work of proclaiming God's goodness in the world, or 3) we acknowledge that there are needs in the world that connect with our needs – like grief support, or fellowship, or general companionship. So we form small groups to help us live in to our purpose after identifying that small group could actually benefit our work as the Church.

Also, because of our engagement with the world around us, we acknowledge the need for missional projects. We may find that there are a lot of people who are hungry, and want to respond to their need for food. We may find that there are a lot of people who are living on the street, and we need to create a way to help house these people. We may find that there are a lot of overworked parents, and we need to find a way to give them reprieve and enjoy a night without their children. ... Missional projects don't get defined by a Board that says, here's what we're going to do; missional projects are a response to the identified needs that stem from our engagement with the community.

As the body – as this corporate entity called the Church – identifies the need for small groups or missional projects because of our engagement in the community, we have a small 11 person Board that offers guidance and support to provide the facility needs, the financial needs, and the personnel needs to assist the work of the whole. The Leadership Board does not exist to create work for the church. The Board exists to support the work of the church. Some of that work is impossible for lay volunteers serving in this capacity, and so we have hired staff who provide additional support of the work of the church. Again, to be clear, the staff are hired to

create work for the church, or even to do the work of the church. Our paid staff are hired to support the work of the church.

And then you have the pastor – that’s me – whose job it is to provide support and guidance to all of this. I’m here to offer the foundational teachings of our faith that undergird this entire inverted triangle that proclaims you are worthy of God’s love – you are worthy of God’s leading – you are worthy to proclaim God’s goodness in the world.

For we are all members of the body – each participants in God’s work in the world. If any one of us suffers, we all suffer; if any is honored, we all rejoice together.

Friends, this is our call. This is the call of the Church, as witnessed in the gifting of the Spirit that brought the Church into formation. We still have some work to do figure out exactly how to live into *this* because we are built on 170 years of *this*. But as our mission defines, our call is not to build ourselves up, it’s in making a space for everyone to know God’s love. To create not just in this physical building, but to create in this community a place where all may know of God’s goodness. May God continue to form and reform us that we may proclaim to all the goodness of God’s love in Jesus Christ. Amen.