

Life Groups – For the Priesthood

Part 5: Being a Contributing Part of the Body of Christ

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In part 4, we looked at what the priesthood of all believers is about. In this part, we'll be looking at how one integrates and functions in the Body of Christ.

What defines the Church?

The church isn't an organisation or a building but is a group of people. So, we are the church. When we say we're going to church we mean we're going to be with God's people, a local group of God's people, not that we're going to a building.

Essentially, two words define the local church (a local group of people): *Integrated* and *Functioning*.

If we're going to be a contributing member to a church then we need to integrate – in other words, we need to actually belong to that church. Sometimes we talk of 'that church' or 'their church' or 'our church', which is good, but it's even better when it becomes 'my church'. This points to ownership and belonging.

Functioning means we are involved. It means we're participating, not spectating. If we don't have a true understanding of the church, if we see it as an organisation or religious institution, then we end up being spectators.

Scriptural definitions of the Church

The Bible talks about the Church as a bride; a temple; a family; a tribe and more besides. But there is one that speaks very loudly and clearly and that is a 'body'. You find Paul use this analogy in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12, particularly.

In these Scriptures it says that Jesus is the head of the body while we, the priesthood of all believers, are the rest of the body. We have to understand that the body is made up of many inter-dependant parts that are not always the same, don't always look the same, or act or function the same. It's made up of a wide variety of parts and yet together we make up the full ministry and function of Jesus, who we represent to the world. We are His hands and His feet to the world. It's a wonderful privilege and responsibility He's given to us.

No one part of the body is more important than the other. Look at your own body – just as important as your eye is, so is your ear. This is the point Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 12.

If we ever think a part is not important and that part doesn't play its role, then the body suffers as it's not living in the fullness and function God had for it. We must therefore fulfil our roles otherwise the entire church suffers.

Here are some other Biblical pictures of the church:

1 Peter 2: 4 – 6

4 As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 5 you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For it stands in Scripture:

“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious,
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

Peter portrays the church as a living, spiritual house, with Christ as the foundation and cornerstone and every believer a stone in that house. One stone is not a temple or a wall, just like one part of the body doesn't make up the whole body and is not effective without the others. Both of these pictures speak about why Christianity is not just about believing but also about belonging. Belonging only happens in a local church.

Hebrews 10: 24, 25

24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

If we're not integrated then how are we going to stir someone else on to love and good deeds? How are we going to encourage others to press on and stand firm in what God has called them to do? And how are you going to be spurred on unless there are others around you who are able and willing to do that?

Rom 12: 3 – 8

3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4 For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, 5 so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. 6 Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; 7 if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; 8 the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

And so one body, different members, each with different opportunities to serve God and add value and make a difference to use the gifts, talents and anointings that God has given so that the body can be built up; otherwise the body suffers.

1 Corinthians 12: 12 – 30

12 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. 13 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.

14 For the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 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. 16 And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

21 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." 22 On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, 24 which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, 25 that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?

Two key elements that are vital to be part of the body and our understanding of local church. Integrated and functioning. Let's look in more detail:

Integrated

The church is not attending meetings or going to a building. It's about being connected through accountable relationships. Because of my relationships with others in the church, when there's a degree of accountability, when I'm not around someone will check up on me. But if I'm not connected, who is going to know when I'm not around?

We're all connected to the Head (Jesus) and then we're connected to each other. This takes place at local church and its different aspects – Life Groups being one of those – where you are able to hold meaningful relationships where they hold you accountable and you hold them accountable. So I work out my salvation through those vital relationships.

If we think of the cross we see it goes vertically and horizontally. Horizontally is you and I, vertically is you and God. Sometimes we just focus on the vertical and think it's just about God and I; or we leave God out the equation and we think it's all about relationships. No, both are important, our relationship with the Father through Jesus and with those around us.

The enemy's strategy is to kill, steal, destroy, remove and separate. The enemy wants to isolate you, looking for someone to devour. If you've seen how a lion hunts, they disperse the herd and look for a victim either on its own or who they can separate. And the enemy operates the same way – he wants to isolate us, have us climb our miff trees, and be out of fellowship, because that makes us easy pickings to him. There's incredible safety and security in the herd, in the church, in accountable relationships. We need them.

Scripture says submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, so we do this in our reverence for him.

Responsibilities of fellowship

How do we conduct ourselves in God's household as family members?

1. Relational integrity and maturity

Scripture must be the foundation that we build our relationships from and relational maturity resonates with **Colossians 3: 5 – 17**.

5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming. 7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self[d] with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. 11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Integrity is discerning the difference between right and wrong; then you act on what that discernment is; and then you live it out. Relational integrity is when you decide that Scripture is your final authority and then you carry that out to relationships.

The scripture above talks about putting off the old self with all its practices of lying and anger and so on, and to put on the new self. So this is what we do in the Church. We don't live this in a vacuum but practice it in love towards others. Relational integrity says we honour those around us. Jesus commands us in John 13:34 to love one another.

Love and grace need to be the new language we speak as believers. This is what we exercise in all our relationships. See also Gal 5:22, 23 and Philippians 2. We no longer do anything out of selfish ambition but consider others better than ourselves in humility. These are the standards for relational integrity. If we're convinced that Scripture is from God then we need to operate that way.

The opposite of integrity is hypocrisy, a stench in the nostrils of the Father in heaven.

Maturity is about growing up and producing fruit, where it's no longer about me but now about others. I honour others above myself, I show brotherly love. See 1 Pet 2:17.

Relational integrity and maturity honours the King.

2. Live healed

So, with the above in mind, we now live healed – emotionally and spiritually. We can't afford to hold grudges and climb our miff tree and stay offended. If we're going to believe what Scripture says and put it into practice, we can't have any time for that. It's hypocrisy to say we've forgiven the person but meanwhile we're grumbling and muttering under our breath. Living healed means we realise ahead of time that someone is going to hurt us and offend us (it's a guarantee) and we decide to forgive and love ahead of time. You must choose to live healed

Some things do take long to get over but we must do what Matthew 18 says – go to the person, not to someone else, and work it out with them.

3. Holding short accounts

We can't afford as new creatures (Col 3) to hold grudges. Love covers a multitude of sins. If we're operating in love all the time, no matter what happens we can forgive. See Matthew 5: 22 – 24.

4. Loving, forgiving and honouring

Not just when we feel like it. At all times. See Matthew 18:21 onwards. We must truly forgive, not just say it. We need to get the Word in us and live out that Word out in our relationships.

Functioning: living as a church

Let's take six pictures that the Bible uses to portray the church to show how relationships need to move from friendship to partnership in the church. We will cover exactly what that means after we have looked at these six pictures.

How else does the Bible portray the church?

- As a body (which has been covered above)
- As a nation – think of a people group, families, cultures, languages, or a tribe (Ephesians 2:12-13)
- As a family – a household (Ephesians 2:19; Romans 8; John 1:12)
- As a bride (Ephesians 5:22-32)
- As a building (also covered above in less detail) (Ephesians 2:21; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17)
- As an army (Ephesians 6:10-18)
- As a priesthood (1 Peter 2:5, 9)

There is something all six of these have in common, which gives us an interesting clue as to how we're meant to function in Christ. It's that none of these pictures allow for an individual to live isolated.

For example, a bride can only be a bride if she has a groom; an army can only be an army if it has soldiers – a soldier is a soldier on his own, but with others he is now an army; a brick

doesn't make a building, it requires many bricks to make a building; a priesthood is not a priest, it is a picture of many priests; and so on.

So what does this mean? *We get our identity as Christians in the Lord based on the identity of someone else.* That's the only way we can exist.

It means we give up a certain part of our own identity in order to become part of something bigger. So a bride no longer stops being a woman but she gives up a lot of her independence to become a bride. A soldier doesn't give up his identity as a soldier, but he takes on a bigger corporate identity in an army. A brick continues to be a brick but gives a part of its identity to be part of a bigger whole.

Functioning: how do our relationships form?

So the above is how we see God expects us to function. There are three levels of relationship we have in the church – *friendship*, *relationship* and *partnership*. And it's not until we move into the third level that we truly start feeling like that soldier, brick or part of the family as we see above.

1. Friendship

This is when a relationship is very simple and on the surface. It's not that all relationships we have must be deep and serious. But in the body of Christ we need to move from friendship to relationship which is a little bit deeper.

2. Relationship

You can only get to this level – a level where we now have a covenant with each other, where we're committed to love each other despite our weaknesses and warts – by being vulnerable. And often we're most vulnerable when we invite people into our house and show them our weaknesses, which is precisely what happens at Life Group. So you're going to have to have a level of trust. You are going to get hurt and that's how it works.

3. Partnership

This is where we want to get to. This is when we're doing something together, we're functioning together.

In Cornerstone and our greater NCMI relationships we've always had this value of 'friendship before function' and we still hold to that value. But don't be misled. Some people think it means that all we're going to be is friends and we're never going to function. But actually it means we're friends while we function. Because a good friendship is built in the process of doing something together. Why? Because you're growing, learning, being vulnerable; you're at your most frustrated, and so on.

We can only really be functioning as Christians if we are in partnerships. We can only have an identity when we are walking it together. That means we have to give up a little bit of who we are – not that you don't have an identity – but it means you don't consider your identity more important than the corporate identity. That's very important.

This is why it's essential for you to know your job and calling in this church, because if you're not doing it then I'm losing out on part of my identity. A teacher can't be a teacher if

no one is sitting and learning from him. He'd be a mad guy talking to an empty auditorium.

Get involved, partner together, find something that is your identity that you can walk alongside with somebody else, for you and for the one walking alongside you.

Questions

1. What does it mean to be integrated into a local church?
2. How do I function in my local church?
3. What defines relational maturity?
4. Am I connected in to the body?
5. Am I operating in the function God has destined for me?