

**1 Corinthians 12:12-31a**  
“The Christian Philharmonic”  
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Wouldn't you love to be able to sit down and have a conversation with the Apostle Paul? I've always thought he is one of the most fascinating people in all of history. Think about it: In the relatively short span of Paul's life, the followers of Jesus who remained after his death became organized. The community of faith grew astronomically, and churches were planted and maintained in major cities like Rome, Ephesus, and Corinth. There was an explosion of Christian faith across the known world at the time. It was likely the result of a lot of hard work on Paul's part, and it's also clear that in most cases, getting the church started was the easy part. Getting them to stay together was incredibly difficult, especially because those churches weren't as organized and problem-free as we might suppose. In fact, as we take a look at Paul's letters in the New Testament, we can see that as the church grew and spread, the congregations encountered more and more problems and arguments, and each eventually became threatened by fragmentation. The larger the church grew, the harder it became to maintain unity, cohesiveness, and order.

This is a fascinating phenomenon that has continued throughout the history of the church. As Christianity continued to grow and spread throughout different cities, nations, and peoples, there were arguments about doctrine, councils (such as the Council of Nicea, which Chuck mentioned

last week) convened to work out proper language and statements of belief. Assemblies of emperors, theologians, pastors, elders, and other assorted Christian followers gathered, all for the purpose of deciding what this church of ours is and who it consists of. What are we? Who are we? What do we believe? And what do we do?

All of these are questions that churches have been asking since the beginning of Christianity. Not surprisingly, Paul addresses these topics several times in his letters, most notably the letters he wrote to the Corinthian church. That church in Corinth had significant problems with maintaining togetherness and unity. Imagine for a minute that this is not Philadelphia Presbyterian Church of Mint Hill, but rather the First Century Christian Church of Corinth. Imagine that we are a very new church, having just been founded under Paul's direction. In our congregation we have practicing Jews, we have pagans, we have zealots, we have Greeks, we have Romans, and we have many other people who are new to following Christ, each coming from a different religious background. On one particular Sunday we decided to have a "Spiritual Gifts Sunday", and during worship that day we decided to characterize and separate everyone here according to different levels of spiritual giftedness. So, we asked those who have five spiritual gifts to stand here at the front. You are the most important members of our church, so you got to stand up here. Those who have three spiritual gifts, you had to stand back in the back. You're doing okay, but you

just haven't been blessed enough to stand up front. You're not quite as important. Those who have one spiritual gift, you had to go up there in the balcony. Maybe if you develop some additional gifts, you'll get to move down to the lower level. Then those of who don't have any spiritual gifts, well, we thanked you for coming and gently suggested that you discover a hobby to occupy your Sunday mornings. That's how the church in Corinth saw themselves, and the spiritual gifts hierarchy was just the beginning. They came up with one issue after another to argue about. They had a habit of emphasizing their differences, instead of considering what they might have in common. I often wonder how in the world Paul kept that church from falling apart.

There's a certain scientific principle that comes to mind as I'm thinking about that church. It's the concept of *entropy*, and it says all things tend to move from a state of order to a state of disorder. Through time, all things - even things that begin in a state of order - tend towards disorganization, and fragmentation, and chaos unless energy is expended to restore order. Let me give you a few examples of what I mean.

My office here at Philadelphia is a prime example of entropy. There is no way that my office will tend towards a state of order. Over time, my office will get increasingly disordered and disorganized. It won't stay organized, ordered, and neat unless I put forth some energy to keep it that

way. If I don't, then it will look much like it does right now. Energy is required to maintain order.

For another example of entropy, you need to look no further than scripture itself. In the beginning, God created an incredibly ordered world. Genesis tells us that God ordered the days and the nights, and created all things and called the world 'good'. Yet, the human story in scripture is a story of increasing disorder and sin. From the moment that the serpent peeks his head out from under a rock, we grow increasingly sinful, increasingly disobedient, and increasingly disorganized. Pretty soon, Cain kills Abel. Shortly afterwards humanity tries to build a tower into the sky to take God's place. Immediately after that, all of humanity becomes so evil that God is forced to send a great flood to cleanse the earth. With each new chapter of human life, we deteriorate further into sin and disorder. It is in this story of increasing sin and disorder that our need for a savior becomes apparent. We cannot save ourselves. Some kind of energy from outside of us is required to save us and restore order.

One final example of entropy is the human body. If you are an average adult, in 24 hours:

- Your heart beats 103,689 times.
- Your blood travels 168,000,000 miles.
- You breathe 23,040 times.
- You move 750 muscles.

- You exercise 7,000,000 brain cells.

All of these things are accomplished by an incredibly ordered system. Our bodies consist of different cells and organs, each with a specific function, yet all working together for the purpose of keeping the body alive. Yet, over time, our bodies deteriorate. We become increasingly disordered. Parts of us wear out. Some of our bodies' functions become disordered, giving rise to disease. Over time, our bodies will deteriorate unless something is done to maintain them or restore the order.

Now I want you to hold that last image in your mind for a while, that image of the human body. Think about it, because that's exactly the image that Paul uses to describe the church. It's a body, he says. He does not describe the church as a bag of marbles, or a clump of rocks, or a bucket of sand. He describes the church as a body, and proclaims that we are all parts of it. We all have different functions and different characteristics, but it is absolutely amazing what we can accomplish when we work together in unison. But just like the human body, this body – the church – tends to deteriorate and break down over time unless something is done to keep us together.

Over time, every church argues over some issue or another. Throughout history, Christians have tended to separate ourselves according to gender, or race, or economic standing, or political view. Sometimes we single out people that we feel shouldn't be a part of "the body of Christ" in

the first place. Sometimes we will let our tendency to separate, and rank, and segregate seep into our community of worship. We pay more and more attention to the ways in which we are different than the things that we have in common. We become unhealthy. We become disordered. Piece by piece, the body of Christ breaks down. That's the bad news.

The good news is that we worship a God who is much larger than ourselves, a God who tirelessly loves and works and moves in us and through us, a God who is very good at restoring life and mission and purpose. Paul knew this God and knew what he had been called to do. He told that congregation in Corinth, "I will show you a still more excellent way." They must have wondered what he was talking about. "What way is that, Paul?" they asked. What can possibly give us a hope that we can remain together in the face of threatening division and separation? The very next sentence in Paul's letter contains the answer. Paul writes, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." It is love that binds us together. It is the love of Christ that is more powerful than any of our disagreements or arguments over doctrine. Without the love of Christ, we are noisy gongs and clanging cymbals.

Paul's imagery here is one of an orchestra, a symphony, in which the performers make nothing but noise. They aren't on the same page of music.

Each performer plays his or her own tune, and the result is nothing but noise and clanging cymbals.

At a meeting of the American Psychological Association several years ago, two psychologists presented findings on how members of different sections of several major symphony orchestras perceived each other. It turns out that the percussionists were viewed as insensitive, unintelligent, and hard-of-hearing, yet fun-loving. The string players were seen as arrogant, stuffy, and un-athletic. The orchestra members overwhelmingly chose "loud" as the primary adjective to describe the brass players. Woodwind players seemed to be held in the highest regard. They were described as quiet and meticulous, though a bit egotistical. It was an interesting study to say the least, and it raised a question: With such widely divergent personalities and perceptions, how could an orchestra ever come together to make such beautiful music? The answer is simple: regardless of how those musicians view each other, they subordinate their feelings and biases to the leadership of the conductor. Under his guidance, they stay together. They remain on the same page. They play beautiful music.

Regardless of how we in the body of Christ view each other, we are called to subordinate our feelings and biases to the leadership of our conductor. We are the body. Jesus Christ is the head. Under his guidance, we are capable of beautiful things. We are the Christian Philharmonic. Through arguments about doctrine, and talk of division, and further decline

into disorder, it is the love of Christ that offers us hope. Increasingly, the church is being called to unite, not around some intractable theological or doctrinal concept, but simply around our love for Jesus, and our love for our neighbors.

Imagine what might be possible if we as Christians put differences aside, and instead let the love of Christ unify us and guide us! Imagine what would happen if we followed Christ, the head, our conductor, into a world in which people with countless differences work together for one common goal: sharing the love of Christ and sharing the gospel. What would happen?

Here, in this place that we call home, in this community of different people who have come together to worship, and pray, and love, we just might find out.

Thanks be to God.