

# Why Should the Church Hold a Regular Members' Meeting?

by Nick Weber

## The Church's Body Image

It is important to note at the start that the church does not get her language of "membership" from secular culture but from 1 Corinthians 12. Listen to Paul, as he writes to the local church in Corinth:

- "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. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body..." (v. 12-13a).
- "If all were a single *member*, where would the body be? As it is, there are many *members*, yet one body" (vv. 19-20).
- "Now you are the body of Christ and individually *members* of it" (v. 27).

Paul here moves our discussion of membership away from the more familiar arenas of membership in a club or voluntary society and directs us, rather, towards membership in a body: namely, Christ's body. Membership in the church, then, is not like membership with the YMCA, or the library, or a political party. It is membership in the body of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

## Two Implications

As we consider this "body image" that Paul gives us, two important implications follow:

### 1. Every Member Matters

In a body, each member, however big or small, strong or weak, visible or hidden, presentable or unpresentable, is critical to the proper functioning of the whole. Every member matters. This image, then, guards the church and her members from two debilitating errors:

1. *Spiritual Despair*—There are some members who might feel they have no role to play at all in the church. They have not the maturity, the cleverness, the skill of the others. They are base, low, and weak. But listen to

how Paul uses the church's body image to move against the struggle of spiritual despair:

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. 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. 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? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. (1 Cor 12:15–20)

Here the church's body image encourages the despairing member to take heart. The same Spirit that energizes the hand energizes the foot. The same Spirit that energizes the eye energizes the ear. As Paul would say elsewhere: "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:4–6).<sup>2</sup>

In light of this *unity*, every member has *dignity*.

2. *Spiritual Pride*—But Paul continues his use of the church's body image in 1 Corinthians 12 to combat a second error: spiritual pride. While some members might be prone to think they are less important to Christ's church, other members might be tempted to think they are more important. Listen to Paul address this:

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." On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 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, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (1 Cor 12:21–27)

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 6:15; Eph 5:30

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Rom 12:4-5

Here those of particular maturity and gifting are reminded that they are no better than the others and, indeed, even have need of the others. Wherever we find ourselves in the church—whether Elders or new believers, teachers or chair-stackers—we all have need of each other.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, “we are members of one another” (Eph 4:25).

In light of this *unity*, every member has dignity. But even more, in light of this unity, every member is critical for the church’s *vitality*. If you decide you are either not good enough or too good for us, we don’t merely lose a member of our “club,” we lose a limb, an eye, an organ. We lose vitality.

## 2. Our Unity Is His Visibility

A second most important implication that emerges from the church’s body image is this: the church’s *unity* is Christ’s *visibility*. Calling the church *Christ’s* body makes us His physical, visible representation on earth. While His physical body is in heaven at the right hand of the Father, His Spirit is poured out upon and animates the church. If we want to know what Christ looks like, all we should have to do is look at His church, His body. When we are united, with each member dignified and vitally connected to the others, Christ is seen in all His glory—by us, by the world, and even by the spiritual beings!<sup>4</sup>

Unity, dignity, vitality...*visibility*!

Sadly, the church’s disunity does not reduce Christ’s visibility, it only distorts and disfigures it. Those who bear Christ’s name but walk not by His Spirit give everyone looking in wrong ideas about Him.<sup>5</sup> If I live apart from the body, whether from spiritual despair or spiritual pride, I can’t possibly get for myself or give to the world the full picture of who Christ is. Such a vision of Christ is only seen when every member of the body is united. Again, our unity is His visibility!

## Making Visible Christ’s Personality, Ministry, and Authority

If the church, as the body of Christ, is His visible representation on earth, it makes sense to ask: what of Him are we actually making visible? Christ’s visibility in and through the church, it seems to me, can be traced

along three lines: His *personality*, His *ministry*, and His *authority*.

Every member is indwelt by Christ’s Spirit and therein is given some sense of His personality (the fruits of the Spirit), ministry (the gifts of the spirit), and authority (the keys of the kingdom). But no individual member represents the fullness of this. It is only as we come together in one body that the fullness of Christ’s personality, ministry, and authority are seen. Again, our unity is His visibility!

### 1. Christ’s Personality (the Fruits of the Spirit)

Christ’s Spirit in us is like sap flowing from the vine to the extremity of its branches. As Christ told His disciples: “I am the Vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing” (Joh 15:5). While this “fruit” can be summed up in a single word—“*love*” (Joh 15:12<sup>6</sup>—its many varieties are itemized by Paul in Galatians 5:22-23a: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” What do these various fruits remind us of but the very heart and personality of our Lord?! He is their essential expression, and by His Spirit, He causes them to blossom in the garden of His church.

Most of these fruits are relational in their expression: I love *you*, I am patient with *you*, I am kind towards *you*, I am faithful towards *you*, I am gentle with *you*, etc. *You* are required for these fruits to be seen in *me*. Hence, again, it is especially in light of our unity as His body that His personality becomes visible.

### 2. Christ’s Ministry (the Gifts of the Spirit)

Christ’s Spirit in us does not only conform us to His personality, it also empowers us to continue His ministry. When Luke refers to his gospel as “all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Act 1:1), he therein implies that the book of Acts would be all that Jesus was continuing to do and teach, only now by His Spirit in and through the church. Christ’s ministry and mission continues by His Spirit through the church! Each believer receives some measure or portion of Christ’s power as a gift to be used in ministry for the sake of His glory being seen in the church and world.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Rom 12:3; 1 Cor 4:7

<sup>4</sup> Eph 3:10; 1 Cor 4:9

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Rom 2:24

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 13

<sup>7</sup> Rom 12:3; 1 Cor 12:11; Eph 4:7

While there are many texts that deal with this,<sup>8</sup> perhaps the most comprehensive statement is found in 1 Peter 4:10-11: “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” In all are stewarding of God’s varied grace, whether in word or deed, it is not us but Christ who is seen!

Given the nature of these gifts of His Spirit, that we each only have a given measure or portion, it is yet again important to point out that it is only in the context of the united church that Christ’s full-orbed ministry can be seen functioning in its fullest expression. We need one another for His mission to advance!

### 3. Christ’s Authority (the Keys of the Kingdom)

Amazingly, the church is not only given by Christ a sense of His personality and ministry, it is also given His authority. This is most clearly seen in the scriptural image of the keys of the kingdom. These keys represent the authority to open and close the door to the kingdom of God. Before the keys of the kingdom are ever anyone else’s, they are first Christ’s.<sup>9</sup> But, in His grace and by His Spirit,<sup>10</sup> He entrusts them to His church. They are to be stewarded under the authority of His heavenly kingship as we serve as His vicegerents on the earth.<sup>11</sup> They are first given with reference to Peter,<sup>12</sup> but are then clearly mentioned with reference to the rest of the disciples,<sup>13</sup> and even the church at large!<sup>14</sup>

Again, it is important to emphasize that this authority is not wielded by a single member but to be exercised as the church comes together. Consider the last stage in church discipline as described in Matthew 18: “Tell it to the *church*” (v. 17). Here the case has risen to the highest court, and who’s involved? Not one leader, but all members. As Jesus would go on to say: “Where *two or three* are gathered in my name, there am I among

them” (v. 19). It is only as we unite together that the authority of Christ functions properly in the church.

Now, an extra word is in order here lest there be misunderstanding. While the church at large holds the keys (and, with them, the broader delegated authority of Christ), she appoints by the Spirit some<sup>15</sup> to lead in a more official capacity.<sup>16</sup> But in this appointment, she never loses her inherent dignity and authority in Christ. Therefore, though she puts certain officers at the helm of the church, it is important that these officers continue to recognize the role the church at large has to play in the ongoing mission and ministry.

Indeed, we see the church in the New Testament exercising her authority in this more corporate manner with regard to certain critical decisions:

- Installing/uninstalling church officers.<sup>17</sup>
- Welcoming/excommunicating church members.<sup>18</sup>
- Discretionals—Other decisions of critical importance brought to the church at the discretion of the Elders.<sup>19</sup>
- Appeals—The congregation may at times appeal decisions made by the officers if enough members are concerned.<sup>20</sup>

If we are to be a church that truly stewards the keys and authority of Christ responsibly we must hold together both the church’s *officerial* and *congregational* authority with great care and concern. Only then will we display for the world, not the mere baseness of man’s authority, but the sublimity of Christ’s!

## The Church’s Central Nervous System

Drawing our discussion to a close, we must now answer in earnest the question that titles this article: *Why Should the Church Hold a Regular Members’ Meeting?* Given all that we’ve gathered thus far, it might be helpful to see a regular Members’ Meeting as part of the church’s central

<sup>8</sup> Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:4-11; 28; Eph 4:11-12

<sup>9</sup> Rev 1:18; 3:7; cf. Isa 22:22

<sup>10</sup> Joh 20:22; 1 Cor 5:4

<sup>11</sup> 1 Pet 2:9; cf. Rev 22:5

<sup>12</sup> Mat 16:19

<sup>13</sup> Joh 20:23

<sup>14</sup> Mat 18:18; 1 Cor 5:3-5; 6:2-3 (where the saints not just the apostles or elders will judge the world and even angels!); 2 Cor 2:10

<sup>15</sup> The two offices mentioned along these lines in the New Testament are those of Elder and Deacon.

<sup>16</sup> Act 1:15; 6:3; 14:23; 15:2-3, 22; 2 Cor 8:19; Tit 1:5

<sup>17</sup> For installing see footnote 16. Uninstalling can be inferred from Gal 1:8, 1 Tim 5:19; 2 Tim 4:3; Jude 3-4.

<sup>18</sup> 2 Cor 2:5-11; Mat 18:15-17; 1 Cor 5. Consider also that welcoming/excommunicating is inferred by the church’s use of the keys of the kingdom.

<sup>19</sup> Act 15:1-29

<sup>20</sup> The ability for the church to bring accusation against and even uninstall church officers implies the need for an appeals process of some sort.

nervous system. Our physical bodies function as a unity of members by means of a centralized system of communication. When this communication is functioning properly, the body members move in unison and with great efficiency. When the communication breaks down, we could call it a stroke or paralysis.

In the same way, the church needs a centralized way of communicating among its various members if these members are to function as a unity. As Paul writes in Ephesians 4:25: "Let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another." Communication is critical in light of our co-membership in Christ's body. We cannot be united without it. And if we are not united, we cannot properly put Christ on display.

Without strong communication, then, we will struggle as a body to make visible His personality, ministry, and authority.

- How can I love you, be patient with you, be faithful to you, etc. if I don't know you, if we don't communicate?
- How can your gifts be used if the church doesn't know what they are, or if you're never made aware of all the various opportunities to plug in and serve?
- How can we rely on the congregational authority and combined wisdom of the church if we never meet to discuss important matters together?

To be sure, the Sunday Gathering and Small Groups of this church all serve in some way the goal of healthy communication among members. But a Members' Meeting is perhaps uniquely suited to achieve it.

These Members' Meetings, therefore, set their crosshairs on the lofty goal of encouraging among us the fruits of the Spirit (as we learn to love one another well), the gifts of the Spirit (as we all find our gifts and use them to advance Christ's mission), and the appropriate use of the keys of the kingdom (as we make important decisions together in the name and Spirit of Christ).

***In other words, these meetings are an attempt to help Mercy Hill Church communicate more effectively, that we might enjoy more unity, and therein give Christ more glorious visibility!***