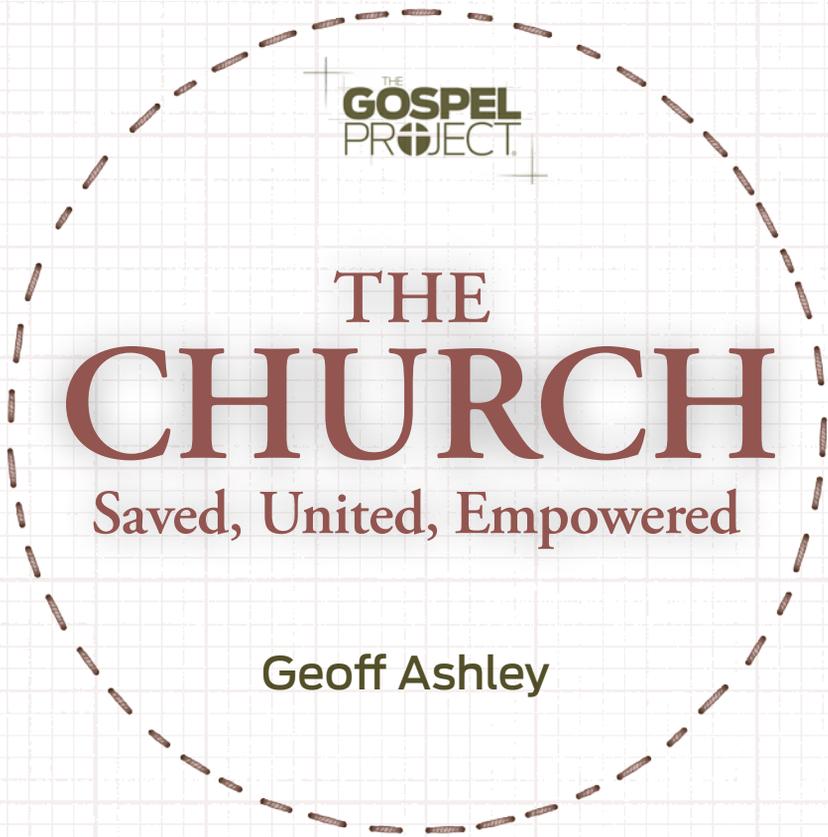


THE  
GOSPEL  
PROJECT

# THE CHURCH

Saved, United, Empowered

Geoff Ashley



THE  
**GOSPEL**  
PROJECT

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Saved, United, Empowered

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## ABOUT THE GOSPEL PROJECT

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Some people see the Bible as a collection of stories with morals for life application. But it's so much more. Sure, the Bible has some stories in it, but it's also full of poetry, history, codes of law and civilization, songs, prophecy, letters—even a love letter. When you tie it all together, something remarkable happens. A story is revealed. One story. The story of redemption through Jesus. This is *The Gospel Project*.

When we begin to see the Bible as the story of redemption through Jesus Christ, God's plan to rescue the world from sin and death, our perspective changes. We no longer look primarily for what the Bible says about us but instead see what it tells us about God and what He has done. After all, it's the gospel that saves us, and when we encounter Jesus in the pages of Scripture, the gospel works on us, transforming us into His image. *We become God's gospel project.*

## ABOUT THE WRITERS

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**Geoff Ashley** is the Groups Pastor for The Village Church in Flower Mound, Texas. He received a ThM from Dallas Theological Seminary in 2009 and has been on staff at The Village since 2006, overseeing development of theological resources. He is married to Kaci.

**Barry Cram** adapted this material for use with small groups.

## HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

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Welcome to *The Gospel Project*, a gospel-centered small-group study that dives deep into the things of God, lifts up Jesus, focuses on the grand story of Scripture, and drives participants to be on mission. This small-group Bible study provides opportunities to study the Bible and to encounter the living Christ. *The Gospel Project* provides you with tools and resources to purposefully study God's Word and to grow in the faith and knowledge of God's Son. And what's more, you can do so in the company of others, encouraging and building up one another. Here are some things to remember that will help you maximize the usefulness of this resource:

**GATHER A GROUP.** We grow in the faith best in community with other believers, as we love, encourage, correct, and challenge one another. The life of a disciple of Christ was never meant to be lived alone, in isolation.

**PRAY.** Pray regularly for your group members.

**PREPARE.** This resource includes the Bible study content, three devotionals, and discussion questions for each session. Work through the session and devotionals in preparation for each group session. Take notes and record your own questions. Also consider the follow-up questions so you are ready to participate in and add to the discussion, bringing up your own notes and questions where appropriate.

**RESOURCE YOURSELF.** Make good use of the additional resources available on the Web at [www.gospelproject.com/additionalresources](http://www.gospelproject.com/additionalresources) and search for this specific title. Download a podcast. Read a blog post. Be intentional about learning from others in the faith. For tips on how to better lead groups or additional ideas for leading this Bible study, visit: [www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject](http://www.ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject).

**GROUP TIME.** Gather together with your group to discuss the session and devotional content. Work through the follow-up questions and your own questions. Discuss the material and the implications for the lives of believers and the mission to which we have been called.

**OVERFLOW.** Remember, *The Gospel Project* is not just a Bible study. *We* are the project. The gospel is working on us. Don't let your preparation time be simply about the content. Let the truths of God's Word soak in as you study. Let God work on your heart first, and then pray that He will change the hearts of the other people in your group.

THE  
**GOSPEL**  
PROJECT

Session 1

# United with a Purpose

That which we would do for Christ if he were here among us we should do for [each] other who are members of the body of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

PETER WALPOT

## INDIVIDUAL STUDY

---

The Word of God is filled with vivid words that depict and describe the people of God—the temple in which God’s Spirit dwells, the vine planted and nourished for the glory of God, the flock that Christ shepherds, the bride of Christ, the family of God, etc. Each image provides insight into our individual and corporate identity as the ransomed, rescued, and redeemed.

Perhaps the most dominant image of the church is the body of Christ. As the body of Christ, we are unified in our common salvation and mission. Though our relationship with God is personal, it’s never private or completely separated from the rest of God’s people.

Why is this “body” language helpful to our understanding of the church?

What other implications are there from understanding the church this way?

Any guy who grew up with an older brother knows what it’s like to hear the phrase “Stop hitting yourself.” Your brother pins you down, typically by sitting on your chest, overpowers you, and uses your own hand to slap your face. It usually isn’t physically painful, but the ego takes a bit of a beating. The “game” may be cruel, but the idea itself is humorous. After all, you don’t normally attack yourself. A body tries to protect its various parts rather than do itself harm.

When the apostle Paul used the metaphor of “the body” to describe the church, he focused on our unity—our need to work together for a common cause. If we really are members of the same body, then there should be an underlying love, protection, sympathy, and compassion for each other. Otherwise, we’re just some kid lying on the ground hitting ourselves, but this time with no big brother.

In this session, we will consider who we are in light of the biblical depiction of the people of God as the body of Christ. As we do so, we’ll see that the body of Christ is joined together and united in one Spirit, in a common experience of suffering and rejoicing, and in a shared opportunity and responsibility to serve each other.

Throughout the week engage these daily study sections on your own. Each of these examines the different ways we are united in Christ as His church. There are three daily readings to prepare you before your group meets for this session. Interact with the Scriptures, and be ready to interact with your small group.

# 1 United in the Spirit

<sup>12</sup> For as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of that body, though many, are one body—so also is Christ. <sup>13</sup> For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. <sup>14</sup> So the body is not one part but many. <sup>15</sup> If the foot should say, “Because I’m not a hand, I don’t belong to the body,” in spite of this it still belongs to the body. <sup>16</sup> And if the ear should say, “Because I’m not an eye, I don’t belong to the body,” in spite of this it still belongs to the body. <sup>17</sup> If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? <sup>18</sup> But now God has placed each one of the parts in one body just as He wanted. <sup>19</sup> And if they were all the same part, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup> Now there are many parts, yet one body.

## 1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-20

If you ever find yourself in Europe and you have some money to spend, go shopping for an authentic Black Forest cuckoo clock. You will be in awe of the craftsmanship, both in function and form. Without the benefit of battery or electricity, it keeps accurate time through an intricate and delicate process. Its pendulum, weights, and gears all work together to accomplish a shared goal of timekeeping.

But for all of its sophisticated complexity, a clock is nowhere near as intricate as a living body. Imagine the degree of care and concern that must go into the creation of a person! This truth also speaks to our identity as the body of Christ. If a clockmaker invests so much time in creating this complex mechanism, how much more should we be amazed at the creation of the living organism that is the body of Christ!

Think about all of the necessary movements that take place for a clock to operate. What would happen if one of the weights were missing or just one of the gears were broken?

How might this perspective help us understand the importance of individual members contributing to the mission Christ has given us as a body?

As the individual parts of the body are called “members,” so the individual persons of the church are called members. Membership is an interesting thing. Many, if not most of us, have been members before in various organizations and entities. We were once members of a high school sports team or the band, boy scouts or girl scouts, honor society or key club, FCA, PTA, or YMCA.

Those who are called the body of Christ share the same breath—the Holy Spirit—who enables and empowers His people for the mission of God. His personal presence is like the blood that pulses through the body and supplies oxygen to live and move. If the Spirit has united us through one faith into one body, then we can assume it is for one purpose. His intentions and plans do not drift aimlessly but are eternal and steadfast.

While the Bible provides various insights into God’s intention for His people, one of the most accessible is that we were created to adorn the person and work of Jesus Christ. As people formed by the gospel, we are united to show forth the beauties of the gospel in the way that we love each other (John 17:20-23). Accordingly, the Spirit has composed the body of Christ in order to facilitate our working together to accomplish the mission of the kingdom of God. The more we understand and appreciate the glory of the body of Christ, the more we will be enthralled with the opportunity to contribute to its common good.

What are some potential areas of division in a local church body?

How does staying sensitive to the Spirit help to guard us against unnecessary division?

What are some ways you and your group can practically pursue more faithful and diligent participation in the body?

# 2

## United in Suffering and Rejoicing

<sup>21</sup> So the eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" Or again, the head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you!" <sup>22</sup> But even more, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are necessary. <sup>23</sup> And those parts of the body that we think to be less honorable, we clothe these with greater honor, and our unpresentable parts have a better presentation. <sup>24</sup> But our presentable parts have no need of clothing. Instead, God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the less honorable, <sup>25</sup> so that there would be no division in the body, but that the members would have the same concern for each other. <sup>26</sup> So if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:21-26

Some of the best movies involve loners. There's something in the Western psyche that loves the story of one man against the world. Whether it's Clint Eastwood riding away into a sunset, Bruce Willis taking down terrorists, Tom Hanks beating the elements on an isolated island, or Will Smith surviving a zombie apocalypse, we are enthralled by the image of a lone ranger.

As interesting and entertaining as such stories might be, they often miss the truth that we were created for community. Only in life together can we experience the fullness and joy for which we were created. In fact, of everything that existed in the garden, only one thing was not good—solitude. God said to Adam, "It is not good for man to be alone." Isolation and rugged individualism may be Western ideals, but from a biblical perspective, they are deficient.

As God Himself is a holy community of three distinct Persons, so we were created to dwell in sacred unity in the church. For this reason, we need to embrace the biblical truth that a member cannot survive without a body. Cut off an ear and see how well it survives, much less hears. Though the body might survive the loss of a hand or foot, its function will be hindered greatly—and the appendage itself will not last long once it is amputated!

Which parts of your body would you consider expendable?

What functions would be hindered if these parts were absent?

This is true of the body of Christ as well. Take a member of the church and disconnect him or her from the body. It will not be long before disease and decay begin to happen. Isolation is an enemy in our pursuit of sanctification. Those who honestly think that they don't need the body of Christ are greatly deceived and in great danger: "One who isolates himself pursues selfish desires; he rebels against all sound judgment" (Prov. 18:1). We need each other to survive and thrive as God intended.

Paul wrote that the entire body suffers when any individual member suffers, and the whole body rejoices when a member rejoices. In doing so, he pointed to the interconnected togetherness that marks the body of Jesus Christ.

It is amazing how an injury to one part of the body will cause pain to another. A misaligned back can cause shoulder or leg pain. Compensating for a blister on one foot can cause difficulty in the other. Pretty soon, walking itself becomes a struggle. The same interconnectedness is required for healing as well. A laceration will not heal without coagulants in the blood. And an infection will not clear up without white blood cells. When the body is functioning properly, it experiences both the pain of injury and the joy of healing.

If we are members of the same body, then surely we shall suffer together. There is no way around it unless we isolate ourselves. But isolation only leads to more pain. There is a profound interconnectedness in the body of Christ such that both pain and pleasure extend beyond individual members. It is to be experienced by the entire community of believers. When one member suffers, all suffer. When one is honored, all rejoice.

What does this notion teach us about individual rights and privileges? In what ways does the gospel affect our perspective of "the individual"?

What does suffering and rejoicing as the body of Christ communicate to those outside the church?

# 3

## United in Service

<sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ, and individual members of it.

<sup>28</sup> And God has placed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, next miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, managing, various kinds of languages. <sup>29</sup> Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all do miracles? <sup>30</sup> Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in other languages? Do all interpret?

1 CORINTHIANS 12:27-30

The original 1992 Dream Team of Olympic basketball was probably the greatest basketball team of all time. Larry Bird, Magic Johnson, Michael Jordan, Karl Malone, and Charles Barkley not only wowed the world with their art but absolutely dominated the competition. The average game was won by 44 points. In fact, the closest game was decided by 32 points!

The individual talent on the Dream Team was astounding. But what was even more impressive was the way they were able to come together as a solitary unit. Good teams are composed of individuals with complementary skills. What if the 1992 USA team had been composed of five traditional centers or five power forwards? Who would have taken the ball up the court? Or who would have protected the lane and contested shots with a team of point guards?

Think of the body of Christ in a similar way. The church is constituted by various persons having differing gifts, skills, and abilities. This is so much more than a basketball team. The church is the means by which God accomplishes His eternal purposes. Every believer is invited to contribute. Every Christ-follower is invited to participate. The Spirit has so composed the church that it is intended to function as a cohesive unit.

**How can you better steward the various gifts and talents you have been given for the sake of your local congregation?**

What structures, organizations, attitudes, or ideas have you encountered that hinder individuals from using their gifts to serve the body of Christ?

The concept of complementary gifts distributed by the Spirit for the common good of the body and the glory of Christ saturates the biblical text. Consider a few of the places where Paul expounded upon this reality (Rom. 12:4-8; Eph. 4:4-7; 4:15-16), or examine Peter's words in his first letter: "Based on the gift each one has received, use it to serve others, as good managers of the varied grace of God" (1 Pet. 4:10).

Service is an essential implication of the gospel. After all, Christ Himself spoke of His mission as summarized by the idea of service: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life—a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

As those who are being conformed to His image, we have a responsibility to mirror and imitate Christ in our serving and preferring others. We have a responsibility to humble ourselves, seek the good of others, and lay down our lives to adorn the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. This is true in our parenting, marriages, workplaces, social circles, and especially in our churches.

What are some practical ways you might live the life of a servant in your family, among your friends, and in your community?

## GROUP STUDY

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### Warm Up

First Corinthians 12–14 provides the most comprehensive discussion on spiritual gifts in the Bible. For three chapters, Paul wrote about the person of the Holy Spirit and the gifts that He has distributed for the edification and encouragement of the body. Paul wrote that the gifts vary (12:4-5) but that it is the same Spirit who empowers them (12:6) and has distributed them according to His will (12:11).

But right in the middle of all of this is love—the central and preeminent ideal that trumps all gifts and individual activity. We often read the following passage with the married couple in mind. But let's not forget that this passage of Scripture was first given for the sake of the body, the Church of Jesus Christ.

<sup>1</sup> If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. <sup>4</sup> Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup> It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup> Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. <sup>8</sup> Love never fails.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-8

How have you attempted to love like this within the body of Christ?

Where have you seen this kind of love on display in your church?

Mark Dever says of the body of Christ, “This is no polite and formal fellowship. It’s a body, bound together by our individual decisions but also bound together by far more than human decision—the person and work of Christ.”<sup>2</sup> If God brings the body together, it will take God’s power to keep it together. It’s not enough to keep learning new applications of this spiritual truth. We will need to keep learning a new day of surrender so God can continue to work through His people—His Body, His Church.

## Discussion

As the body of Christ, the church is the extension of his ministry.<sup>3</sup>

**MILLARD J. ERICKSON**

We all need each other because we are an extension of Jesus Christ. When we come together, we have the opportunity to express our love to the community. God designed it this way. We are important—each one of us! A voice from church history once said, “Even if the body had only its most important member, it would still be useless without the others.”<sup>4</sup> That’s another way of saying, “We are only as important as those with whom we serve.”

During this time you will have an opportunity to discuss what God revealed to you during the week. See this as a time to serve and minister one to another. Listed below are some of the questions from your daily reading assignments. They will guide your small-group discussion.

1. What are some potential areas of division in a local church body? How does staying sensitive to the Spirit help to guard us against unnecessary division?
2. What are some ways you and your group can practically pursue more faithful and diligent participation in the body?
3. What does this notion teach us about individual rights and privileges? In what ways does the gospel affect our perspective of “the individual”?
4. What does suffering and rejoicing as the body of Christ communicate to those outside the church?
5. How can you better steward the various gifts and talents you have been given for the sake of your local congregation?
6. What structures, organizations, attitudes, or ideas have you encountered that hinder individuals from using their gifts to serve the body of Christ?
7. What are some practical ways you might live the life of a servant in your family, among your friends, and in your community?

## Conclusion

Often admonitions to pursue unity are really just subtle admonishments to uniformity. The history of Christian missions is littered with stories of missionaries, many well-intentioned, who equated cultural conformity with conversion. But the clear biblical charge to pursue unity is not a call toward uniformity. God doesn't desire a homogeneous church of clones but a gloriously diverse body that highlights the creativity of God Himself.

As the triune God is three distinct and diverse Persons dwelling in perfect unity, so the church is intended to be composed of varied and assorted members pursuing a similar unity. What a beautiful picture of the gospel to begin to pursue even now—a picture that will one day be fully realized in the age to come with a multitude from every nation, tribe, and tongue as the kings of the earth all bring their own unique glory into the city to come (Rev. 7:9; 21:24).

### **Spend some time praying this for yourself and for your group:**

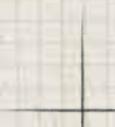
“God, teach us what Your church looks like as we gather around Your resurrected Son. Lead us to suffer with those who suffer and rejoice with those who rejoice. Help us to serve one another in love and humility. Give us the ability to obey You as we express Jesus Christ in our neighborhoods and communities. Amen.”

1. Peter Walpot, “The True Yieldedness and the Christian Community of Goods,” in *Early Anabaptist Spirituality*, ed. Daniel Liechty (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994), 179.
2. Mark Dever, *What is a Healthy Church?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 26.
3. Theodoret of Cyr, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians 247*, quoted in *1–2 Corinthians*, ed. Gerald Bray, vol. VII in *Ancient Christian Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 123.
4. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 961.
5. Augustine, *Letters 99*, quoted in *1–2 Corinthians*, ed. Gerald Bray, vol. VII in *Ancient Christian Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 128.





# Uniting God's Kingdom People



Who are we? What is the church? In the New Testament we see that we are not simply individuals. We are the body of Christ—God's temple—united in truth and given the mission of making disciples. We are God's kingdom people, saved by Jesus and empowered by the Spirit. We are a crucified people dead to sin and a resurrected people alive for righteousness. *The Church: Saved, United, Empowered* explores the nature and purpose of the church.

## 6 SESSIONS

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