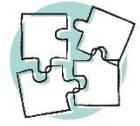




## What Does It Mean to Be Spiritual? 2) You're An Integral Part of the Team

Ravens are really quite smart. In captivity they've been trained to vocalize with more sounds than most parrots. They recognize other ravens for years and reciprocate acts of kindness. Scientists have observed them showing empathy for one another and looking out for one another. When Ravens mate, they don't just abandon one another after their first night together or even after the nest has flown. They mate for life. They stick together! For a bird that can live for up to twenty years in the wild and over forty years in captivity that's a lot of sticking around. And the female bird isn't left to build and watch the nest all on her own. Both male and female work together as a team. Ravens are known to roost in larger groups for safety. One bird can call out dangers for the whole group. And you might not even realize it, but they work together with others. They've been known to mimic the call of wolves in the wild. They do this in order to get the wolves and to find a carcass when it is still fresh so that the wolves can eat it and tear it open for the ravens. They even work with humans! Ravens have been observed placing acorns and other nuts in front of the tires of parked cars so that when the car drives off it cracks them open. Okay, so maybe having a bunch of nut shells in your driveway is not so helpful to us, but you get my point. They are smarter than your average bird. They seem to understand the importance of faithfulness, sticking together, and working as a team. After hearing all those ways in which ravens understand teamwork you might argue they know better than us. We don't always recognize the need to work together and stick together. This morning we continue our series on the latter part of 1 Corinthians by asking, "what does it mean to be spiritual?" We see it means recognizing the importance of working together.



Teamwork wasn't a strong point for the Corinthian congregation. Paul has to help them understand what made them all on the same team. It wasn't their ethnicity or what they did in life. Corinth had a diverse Christian congregation. Paul mentions Jews and Greeks, slave and free. Yet they all belonged together. They were all different in the congregation at Corinth, but together they all made up one body of believers. So it is with everyone who belongs to the body of Christ. There are believers in every part of the world and from every walk of life. They are the body, Christ the head.

What makes the parts of a body all one? It is born that way. So it is with the body of Christ, his Church. We were each born as part of a body. Paul refers to our rebirth in baptism as what made us all one. "We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body." It doesn't matter whether you were baptized by man, woman, pastor, bishop, youth minister, or someone else. You were baptized by the Spirit. All of us were. Baptism is not some ritual or ordinance that makes us members of a congregation. It is a gift of God that makes us members of the body of Christ. All Christians everywhere who have been baptized received a new birth by the Holy Spirit. And as he worked that gift of faith, he brought a rebirth into the body of believers. If there was one thing every believer in Corinth had in common it was that the Spirit baptized them, and through that baptism made them members of the body of Christ. So it is with everyone who is baptized.

If there was anything that ought to have united the diverse Corinthian Christians it would have been their new birth into the body of Christ. **But divisions still came.** As you read the letter you begin to understand that false teaching and sinful living can cause divisions among believers. Those types of divisions are a sad result of sin. Just as a body has to fight off infection or cancer the body of believers must take care to watch out for false teaching and immoral living. Those things can take over and a body to make it weak or kill it. But Paul is dealing with another source of division in the latter part of his letter. Healthy parts of the body can stop working. That's what was happening in ancient Corinth. Some were starting to act like they didn't belong to the body.

Christians are **still tempted to think that belonging to a body is optional.** Some don't gather with other believers at all. They reason that gathering with other Christians can cause a drain on their own life and energy. And they don't see value in their own role as part of the body. So, they dismiss church membership and say they don't need that. They foolishly break themselves away from the body and stop functioning as a member of the body.

We might be tempted to join in that type of sinful, selfish reasoning. We might begin to think, "If I can grow in faith on my own, I don't need to gather with other believers." Entertaining this thought might stop someone from regularly coming to worship and Bible study. They act for a time as if they don't really belong to a body of believers. This is as foolish as your foot saying, "I don't need oxygen from the lungs or blood from the heart anymore." A Christian can't just decide that they don't belong to the body. If a Christian decides they don't want to work together with other Christians, they are foolishly dismissing the fact that they belong to the body. "...If the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body."

**Each part is vital to the body.** You and I may not always see the impact God intends us to have, but he does desire us to serve with a real impact. God has a design for his Church, and you are included in his design! "*God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.*" It is a lie of the devil to believe that you are better off on your own alone. The devil desires to have each part cease its functioning. If each one of us were to say that we were tired of working with the rest of the body, there would be no body, no service, no building up, no love, and no sharing of the gospel.

If we each decided we'd be better off on our own then there'd be no Rock of Ages, no growing together, no spreading the good news together, no supporting each other in faith, no leading others to share in the joys of the body, and no encouraging each other. If this body of believers stopped functioning there'd be one less part of the larger church body we work together with. There'd be one less church sharing gifts for the training of pastors and teachers, one less congregation supporting the world-wide gospel mission work of our church body, one less congregation collecting gifts for places like the new Seminary in Vietnam and for the pastors who teach others at places like Hong Kong, Mexico, India, and all over the world. Our enemy wants us to break away, stop working together, and remain divided.

And at times that can, in fact, be tempting for us. **Why do we sometimes want to just give up?** Isn't it because we have challenges as a body of believers? Isn't it because keeping a body healthy and feeding it can take work? Isn't it because it means sharing in each other's pains and struggles? Isn't it because at times mission work is hard work? Isn't it because every body of believers, no matter how pure, is a body comprised of sinners -sinners like us. This body it seems, often turns out to be a mess -especially when selfishness and individualism cause each part to foolishly rebel against the head and break away.

But God desires just the opposite. **He desires that you see yourself as an integral part of his team, part of his grand design** for his church. He carried out this design for us. And he did it despite that it meant hard work. It meant dealing in great patience with people like the ancient Corinthians, great patience with people throughout history who have worked to divide the body, and great patience with people like us who don't always work like the team we ought to be. He came to bring a seemingly impossible unity: one between sinners. And an even more impossible thing: unity between sinners and their God. **He did this by giving his own body.** Instead of saying to us, "You don't belong to the body" he says, "Take my hands, my feet, my very life. I give my body so that they all might belong to it." In order that you and I and all people might be welcomed into his Church as members of his body, he gave his life. Baptized into his death we are joined with the body of Christ. We belong to him. And now he **lives as the head of the body.** We share in the eternal joys of Christ our head who rose from the grave!

Jesus is the one who has sent the Spirit and now sends us to baptize and teach. The living head calls on us to use each gift given to us to work together in his name. As a congregation and synod we are blessed to be united in teaching and to work together for the truth.

**Being a part of a larger body involves** true humility in playing a small role in a larger body. Some will get more attention or thanks as they carry out their work, others may not. This has nothing to do with value or importance. Let me give you just some small examples of this truth. We had a concert here last night. Three musicians served our church body by sharing their encouraging music. It was beautiful music and in order to encourage us they spent hours driving up and hours setting up their music. I had come with five children with me. When the concert was over the band eventually started packing up for the next leg of their tour. They were headed to the Apache reservation to play at Open Bible church today. As they were packing up, I realized that I would need to hang around for a while to lock the doors after they were done since I appeared to be the last one here. Normally this is no trouble at all for me. But this time it meant I'd need to keep my five children at church for a bit longer. They did well coming hours early with me to open the doors, but the littlest one started asking in a tired voice, "Can I go home. I'm hungry." But then I saw someone serving quietly in the background while the band packed up. She was setting up for the service, getting the sacrament ready to serve and took it upon herself to make sure the flowers we have today look nice. I won't mention her name because she knows so many others serve in the same way and she doesn't ask for attention. But I can tell you I was more thankful than she realized when I saw another member of the body still hanging around with a key to lock up after the band had packed up. Those are just two small examples of the many ways a body of believers functions. It isn't and can't be all one person. If it were, where would the body be?

Finally, our teamwork as part of the body means **sharing in everything with one another.** It means concern for the struggles we each face. *"If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."* Ravens taught me a lesson on this type of care. I recall going to a cemetery with my family when I was very little. In that cemetery I was allowed to wander off a little. I noticed an older looking raven hopping along the path. So I followed it. It didn't seem to mind, and it couldn't fly off. Intrigued, I kept following it. It finally gave up and let me sit next to it. But it wasn't alone. Before long one raven which had spotted me following the old bird called out. Then others came and called out. Soon there were dozens and dozens of birds in all the trees around me. They were concerned about that one old raven. What seemed like a hundred ravens all spoke up in the surrounding trees and around the surrounding tombstones as if to say, "Hey, you better leave him alone." One was suffering, the many suffered with it.

So it is with the body of Christ. **When one person grieves,** can you imagine how sad and lonely that grief would be if the rest of the body didn't take note or express concern? God intends us all to share in each other's concerns, just as he shared in ours. That's amazing. We're not perfect at it. But he is. And in times of trouble his body is the best place on earth to be. Being part of the body also means sharing in each other's joys. How sad would it be if someone in a congregation was blessed with something in their life but no one else seemed to care? How awesome to be able to rejoice with one another and give thanks to God together for life's blessings. That's amazing. There's no place I'd rather be rejoicing than with members of the body of Christ.

What does it mean to be spiritual? It means to function as part of a body. And you are the body of Christ.