

When I was a child I lived in a place where I didn't feel that I belonged.

We were a minority group in the land where I was born, South Africa. Both my parents were born in England. Our culture was British.

I spoke English, but the language of the governing majority was Afrikaans. It was their “Vaderland,” not the “land of my fathers.”

- When I was a teenager we moved to North America.

Then people asked me where I was from. They said I talked funny. So I still didn't feel that I belonged.

So I have never rooted to any place. I consider myself a “free citizen of the world.” I think I could live almost anywhere on the planet, as long as it's warm.

- Aside from my immediate family, there is one context where roots are important to me. It's with my church family. That's where I expect to feel that I belong.

That's the tough part of being an interim pastor. Liz's and my roots can't go very deep before we have to move on. But for the hundreds of you who consider Crossroads your church home it's extremely important to know that you belong.

If you're old enough, you remember the television sitcom “Cheers.” It's about a place—a pub—where people could feel that they belong. The words of the theme song say it best: *‘Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name; where they're always glad you came; to be where you can see troubles are all the same; and everybody knows your name.’*

A corner pub illustrates the old adage, *‘Misery loves company.’* Someone added, *‘. . . but only if the company is just as miserable.’* (Perry W. Buffington) But a pub doesn't offer any lasting hope.

Each of you needs a place where you feel accepted, understood, loved, forgiven, and refreshed. It should be here at Crossroads.

As a Christian you're supposed to be spiritually connected to people who are glad you came, and they know a whole lot more than just your name—and they still love you!

- My sermon text today is 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. The Spirit of God inspired the Apostle Paul to write this to the church at Corinth in the Roman province of Achaia.

It was not a healthy church. Here's a snippet from his letter: *‘In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it.’* (1 Corinthians 11:17 & 18)

Some of the members of the Corinthian church were wealthy; others were slaves. To the slaves the idea of belonging meant they belonged to a slave owner who treated them as things, not as people.

The only place in the world where Christian slaves could feel that they belonged and that they were “somebody” was in the church.

But that was not happening in the Corinthian church.

Some people in the church merely tolerated the slaves.

- Paul confronted this abominable abuse in the church.

He used a vivid metaphor to explain how every follower of Jesus Christ fits into a healthy church. It's the analogy of a body with all its parts working together.

¹² *The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.*

¹³ *For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body-- whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free-- and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.*

¹⁴ *Now the body is not made up of one part but of many.*

¹⁵ *If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body.*

¹⁶ *And 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.*

¹⁷ *If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?*

¹⁸ *But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.*

¹⁹ *If they were all one part, where would the body be?*

²⁰ *As it is, there are many parts, but one body.*

²¹ *The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!"*

- ²² *On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,*
²³ *and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty,*
²⁴ *while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it,*
²⁵ *so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.*
²⁶ *If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.*
²⁷ *Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.*

The Apostle Paul gives us some penetrating insights into what it means to belong in a healthy church.

I. IT'S A PLACE WHERE YOU FIT IN. 1 Corinthians 12:12-13

If you belong somewhere, there's a place where you fit in. You're "somebody."

A man was telling his workmates, "In my house, I'm really 'somebody.' Every night my wife yells from the kitchen, 'Will somebody take out the garbage!'"

Obviously, that's not the way to be somebody in a healthy church.

If you don't find acceptance and respect in your church something's wrong with the church, even if there's also something wrong with you.

- Paul explained:

¹² *The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.*

¹³ *For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body-- whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free-- and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.*

The word "parts" in v.12 is the Greek word *melé* in the original text. That word also means "members." That's how some versions of Scripture translate it (ESV).

Members of a church are like members of a body. They fit in.

When you confess your sins to God and put your trust in Jesus Christ alone as your Savior, your sins are forgiven and you become a new spiritual creation. God's Spirit actually makes you part of a living spiritual organism—a body of which Jesus Christ is the Head.

In v.13 we see that the Holy Spirit fits you into your proper place where you belong.

- But this wasn't working properly in the Corinthian church.

When they had their community meal with Communion, as was their custom in the early church, the wealthy members didn't wait for the slaves to arrive. They didn't share with them. They ignored them, as if they didn't belong.

So the Apostle Paul confronted them about it: *'When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk.'* (1 Corinthians 11:20-21)

Fitting in is not just for your own benefit. For the church to be healthy, we need you to fit in where you belong.

- One of the most deplorable things in a church is to give others the impression that they don't belong, or fit in.

If you are a true follower of Christ and this is your church, but you feel that you don't quite fit in, that's serious.

The pastors, ministry staff, elders and Board of the church want to make it right so that you can say from your heart, *"This is where I belong. I'm accepted and I'm respected, and I know I fit in here."*

II. IT'S A PLACE WHERE YOU MUST BE YOURSELF. 1 Corinthians 12:14-16

If you feel that you have to try to be like someone else to fit in, you will never belong.

It's true that to fit into Christ's body, the church, you have to be different from what you used to be.

Christians are people who have experienced a new birth to become new spiritual creations.

In the church we encourage you to be yourself, as someone whose life has been changed by God's grace.

- It's okay to be different. In fact, it's important to be distinctively yourself.

What unites all the different members in a church is our common faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord.

We celebrate our differences. Let's see how the apostle Paul puts it in this metaphor of the church as a body:

¹⁴ *Now the body is not made up of one part but of many.*

¹⁵ *If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body.*

¹⁶ *And 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.*

In the first verse of this chapter Paul says he doesn't want the church to be ignorant about spiritual matters—spiritual gifts.

These are the key differences among Christ's followers.

If you are an ear, the body needs you to hear. Important as the eye is, it can't hear. Nor can the foot smell—I take that back; I have known some foul exceptions!

In verse 13 we saw that there were cultural differences in the church--Jews, Greeks, slaves, and freedmen. But none of those differences meant some belonged more than others.

A single parent, a person who has served time for a crime, a struggling or recovering substance abuser, a Republican or a Democrat should be able to say, *"This is my church and I know that I belong."*

The only differences that matter are those that make you fit in. They are what the Holy Spirit has placed in you so that you can be all you're supposed to be and do all you're supposed to do as Christ's follower.

III. IT'S A PLACE WHERE YOU ARE NEEDED. 1 Corinthians 12:17-21

If for any reason you don't fit in properly, it hurts you and it hurts the whole church.

John Calvin, the great reformer wrote: *'No member of the body of Christ is endowed with such perfection as to be able, without the assistance of others, to supply his own necessities.'*

Calvin learned that from the apostle Paul.

¹⁷ *If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?*

¹⁸ *But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.*

¹⁹ *If they were all one part, where would the body be?*

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²¹ *The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!"*

This is how our Lord designed his church. No one is expendable.

The Roman Poet Livy (58BC-AD17) wrote that in the early days of the Roman Republic some disenchanted plebian soldiers withdrew from Rome and threatened to found a new city of their own. But Menenius Agrippa used the analogy of the body with its belly and limbs to persuade them to return to Rome. Rome needed them. They were not disposable parts.

In a church where you really belong and fit in, others will be spiritually connected to you. They will trust you and depend on you. You will be missed if you move away. That's church!

- We must also be careful, because destructive forces do arise in every church.

The apostle Paul gave this heads-up to the elders of the church at Ephesus: *'I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!'* (Acts 20:29-31)

California is proud of its Giant Sequoias—the huge Coastal Redwood Trees. Some of those beauties soar to almost 300 feet. Let me tell you a little tidbit about those sequoias. Their roots are actually quite shallow. This is surprising when you consider their height and the fierce winds they have to withstand. Do you know how they survive and thrive and stay standing upright? Their shallow roots spread out and intertwine with the other redwoods around them. They hold each other up. They grow in groves. God didn't make them to be independent.

In a church where you belong you are needed and you need others, because we hold each other up. That's the way our Lord planned it.

IV. IT'S A PLACE WHERE YOU FEEL SAFE. 1 Corinthians 12:22-26)

A safe place is a place where you can be real without being afraid of abuse or attack.

You should know without a doubt when you walk into Crossroads Church that you are safe.

In a healthy church you feel safe to come as you are, because you'll be with people you can trust to love you and help you. When you feel safe, you don't have to pretend to be something you're not.

- Some people seem to think that to be a valued part of the church you have to have to be "cool" and look good. Otherwise you're insignificant.

Is that what Paul says? Let's see.

²² *On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,*

²³ *and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unrepresentable are treated with special modesty,*

²⁴ *while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it,*

²⁵ *so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.*

²⁶ *If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.*

Parts of our bodies aren't pretty. It's a good thing that most of our parts are covered by skin.

I don't have a spectacular spleen or an adorable pancreas—nor do you.

Some of us exercise regularly for the sake of our parts that can't be seen—the heart and lungs. We've given up on the parts that can be seen.

- In these verses Paul speaks about parts of the church suffering (26). When this happens the body is equipped to rush aid to those parts.

We have some people in our church body who are hurting and need special care. Are they getting it?

We all need to feel safe and protected.

You may have been through the ringer before you came to Christ and became his follower. You don't need to be put through the ringer at church, where you're supposed to feel loved, accepted, and forgiven.

- Christians are people who have been forgiven. But they're not perfect. That means we are supposed to forgive one another.

According to our Lord Jesus Christ, if we refuse to forgive one another God will not forgive our sins (Matthew 6:15).

This warning from our Lord is so serious it should make us shudder even to think of violating it. But still, some Christians hold on to resentments and refuse to forgive.

I don't know how a Christian can lay his head on his pillow at night and sleep if he persists in harboring bitterness against a fellow Christian. His eternal welfare is in peril, according to our Lord. He is on shaky ground.

A safe church is filled with Christians who live with an on-going gratitude to God for his forgiveness.

- A healthy church is a place where you feel safe. It's a place where you will know that if you fail or fall and blow it, the people won't condemn you or reject you. They will love you and help you.

The apostle wrote this letter to a very troubled, unhealthy church. Even so, he included this statement:

²⁷ *Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.*

If you belong to our Lord Jesus Christ—by this I mean if you have confessed your sins to him and asked for his forgiveness and have placed your faith in him alone as your Savior—then you belong to his church—the body of which he is head.

We at Crossroads want you to be able to say:

1. This is my church and I know that I fit in.
2. This is a place where I can be myself—everything God wants me to be.
3. This is a place where others need me and I need them.
4. This is a place where I feel safe.

If that's not true about you, I urge you to make sure that you are right with God through faith in Jesus Christ, and right with one another.