Factors for Building a Cohesive Church (1 Corinthians 12–14)
Dr. Mark Brock
Understanding how spiritual gifts and church life should lead our people to appreciate and be faithful to the local church

I. Introduction

Many churches struggle with developing genuine and strong unity. This failure results in common weaknesses:

- People leave over small and inconsequential disagreements
- Commitments are low (a natural consumer mindset)
- Sin easily and quickly shears people away from church life
- People fear to ask questions or be viewed as differing on non-essential matters
- A “cloning” where everyone unnaturally fits into the expected profile
- Doctrinal shallowness is tolerated/appreciated for the sake of unity

Unfortunately the realities of ministry often incline leaders toward managing a church with disunity and struggles by trying not to “rock the boat” in the hopes that having no problems is good. Generally speaking, seeking to maintain the status quo in lieu of growth is an abdication of leadership (Eph 4:12). Thus, this approach is to be rejected.

Several pragmatic solutions which create unity or loyalty seem to frequently be found in evangelical churches

- Strong leadership or dynamic leadership
- Strong program and appealing worship/music etc.
- Niche ministry and branding
- An “Elijah Attitude” which communicates we are the only ones doing it right

It would seem, from my observation, that people in a given church are often brought together by common, unique values (i.e., fundamentalism, expository preaching, worship styles, the KJV, FIC, John MacArthur, certain standards, Reformed dogma, etc.).

II. Clarification of the Problem

Building unity is a God-given imperative. This is an ideal that the church, particularly the leadership, ought to pursue with resolve (Eph 4; 1 Cor 12–14). Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. (1 Pet 3:8). The Bible presents unity within a different framework from the above solutions. I propose that principles found in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians 4 should guide us toward a means by which we should pursue biblical unity.

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1All quotations from Scripture are taken from the ESV unless otherwise noted.
III. Theological Principles of NT Spiritual Gifts

In Ephesians 4, Romans 12, and 1 Corinthians 12–14 when the Apostle Paul instructs his readers concerning spiritual gifting, he does so in the context of local church unity. Likewise when Peter briefly touches on the topic of gifting (1 Pet 5:8–11) he begins verse eight by urging his readers to “keep loving one another earnestly.” Consequently, as we consider our “togetherness” we should seek to reflect the NT text which incorporates its discussions of gifting into appeals for unity. This is not to suggest that a right understanding and practice regarding the gifts is all that must be done to achieve unity in the local church. Rather, that biblical unity must necessarily include biblical thinking and practice regarding the gifts.

A. Spiritual gifts are given to strengthen the local body of Christ

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Cor 12:7)

So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church. (1 Cor 14:12)

For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. (1 Cor 14:17)

What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. (1 Cor 14:26)

The purpose behind Paul’s statements is to invalidate the use of the untranslated expression of tongues. He begins chapter 12 with principles concerning body life, then in chapter 14 he applies these principles to the Corinthians problem. Since the use of untranslated language has no strengthening value for the assembly, he concludes that in such cases the speakers should “keep silent.” (14:28)

We conclude then, that a proximate goal for God’s gifting is the edification of the local church. The ultimate goal of spiritual gifts is specifically stated in 1 Peter 4:11 as “that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.” (See also 1 Cor 14:25)

These factors then guide our understanding of what types of gifts are validly expressed in this age. Those gifts that strengthen the body by helping to accomplish its God-given mission ought to be considered valid manifestations of these gifts of the Spirit (e.g., being a good basketball player is excluded, while being gifted with evangelistic fervor/skill would be included).

2The implications of this discussion concerning spiritual gifts refers to a local church. Further, the explicit statement in 12:27 warrants this interpretation. Paul’s theology of the body of Christ here should bring about a firm commitment to the local church and to membership therein.
B. Spiritual gifts are sovereignly given to all believers

_All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills._ (1 Cor 12:11)

_And there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone._ (1 Cor 12:6; see also 12:8; Eph 4:7; 1 Pet 4:10; Rom 12:6)

Our theological conclusion is that God has graciously granted every believer with the ability to strengthen the body in some manner. Practically this will lead us to conclude that it is therefore incumbent upon leadership to administrate the body in such a way that all members of a local church are encouraged to serve the body.

C. Spiritual gifting is intentionally diverse for two related purposes

1. To produce cohesive unity through need

_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?_ 18 _But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose._ 19 _If all were a single member, where would the body be?_ 20 _As it is, there are many parts, yet one body._ 21 _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._" (1 Cor 12:17–21)

The point is hard to miss. Different parts of the body genuinely need the help of another body part. Eyes cannot grab a fork and eat food. Your head makes a poor foot. Mutual need forces the body to rely on its manifold body parts. Likewise, God sovereignly withholds gifting each of us with all that that we need so that everyone is dependent upon others in the assembly. God does not make “Swiss army knife” Christians that can do everything. In fact, the Corinthian’s evaluation was so contrary to God’s that they thought certain parts were unnecessary when God says they are truly indispensable.

Every Christian ought to think of their local church with the thought, “I need what I can only get from my assembly.” Some aspects of God’s grace only come through a singular, divinely appointed means. The church is that appointed means for ministering God’s grace and truth to believers.

2. To produce cohesive unity through diverse ability

_Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;_ 5 _and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord;_ 6 _and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone._ 7 _To
each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Cor 12:4–7)

22 On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable...But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, 25 that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. (1 Cor 12:22, 24–26)

God has composed the body so that “there may be no division.” (12:25)
The mutual care and compassion of the church brings about shared suffering, shared glory, and shared joy. Diversity means that the church is equipped and prepared to meet a large breadth of need.

No single member is to exist in isolation from his church body, nor is the body healthy when its individual members do not engage in service for the good of that body.

Note: The consumer mentality and the laity/clergy distinction have caused much harm in this regard (see Saucy, The Church in God’s Program, 127–9). A failure to exhort believers to embrace this biblical expectation may result in ambivalence for Christian fellowship or negligence toward others. We have allowed believers to become an audience, and we do not structure the church to engage life in interdependence. At times the pastor and leaders are the worst offenders, living in isolation.

D. Love is necessary in body life

Sinful expression of independence, self-glorification, family supremacy, indifference, and pride are overcome by love for our fellow-believer and our Lord. Division and self-aggrandizing were present in the Corinthian church. It is then no surprise that Paul says that if he has the most extravagant and ostentatious expression of gifts, “but have not love, I gain nothing.” (13:3) The readers are encouraged to “pursue love.” (14:1)

IV. Practical Application of these Gifting Principles

- Every believer is gifted by God for service in the local church
- Every believer needs others believers to strengthen him
- Every believer is needed for the strengthening of others
- Every believer is essential to the mission which brings God glory

These ideals seem, well...idealistic. However, the practical consequence of these theological truths should produce assemblies that are filled with believers growing
in their love and service for one another. There are multiple reasons that these objectives are not moving our churches today.

A. Communicating truth has primacy

*And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.* (1 Cor 12:28)

*Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.* (Eph 4:15–16)

The list in 1 Corinthians begins with “first Apostles” identifying them with an ordinal number, indicating rank (Fee, *Corinthians*, 619–20). Such being the case we notice that the first three are gifts of communication of the divine message through propositional truth. This would harmonize with Paul’s exhortation to Timothy when he argues that the inspired Scripture is profitable for instruction which leads to suitability for service (2 Tim 3:16-17).

Biblical doctrine is the basis for unity. It makes sense that the teaching and communication gifts are listed first since this logically precedes unity achieved through other aspects of body life. Ephesians 4 explains that the church is equipped by its leaders and this maturity or unity in truth then produces to unity in love and life.

B. Church structure should be intentional

1. Communicate the body principle of diversity of gifts and dependency

2. Pastors and teachers are to equip members to be leaders and let them lead!

   It is my understanding that the gifted teacher-leaders are “to equip the saint for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” (Eph 4:12) Essentially, Scripture indicates that pastors labor to equip the members to serve. They equip through instruction and shepherding. If a pastor keeps himself as the singular and primary servant in a congregation it is hard to imagine that the church could ever grow past 100 believers. Even if you can carry that ministry load, you should share ministry.

3. Church program should be structured to encourage service and foster relationships among the members

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3A good book for helping a pastor to think through ministry and church life is *the Trellis and the Vine* by Colin Marshall and Tony Payne.
C. Encourage organic ministry and everyday body-life

The church is an assembly of people. It would seem that most ministry will happen away from the general assembly of the people. Often we don’t need another official church program. The body simply needs its parts to be obedient Christians. Church leaders should seek to facilitate this.

a) Prayer  
b) Hospitality  
c) Evangelism  
d) Discipleship  
e) Helping socially in the community  
f) Fellowship  
g) Personal care of needs/visits

D. Church life is messy, but good

1. Sharing service will allow people to make mistakes (have you read the letters to Corinth?)

Suggestion: Yes it will. Leadership is needed for this reason. Overseers ought to be present to encourage, to guide people to where they may genuinely be gifted, and to encourage with patience. Shepherds spend time with sheep and overseers manage and observe.

2. You may not have many equipped people

Suggestion: If this is the case your church may be new and/or small. Focus on a few leaders and teach them so that they can begin leading. Further, not all service is teaching. Give plenty of opportunity for growth outside of teaching opportunities (admin, hospitality, labor, etc.)

3. You may fear doctrinal or teaching errors

Suggestion: train leaders. Let another teach and be there with them to encourage them and guide them to what they should know, believe, teach, etc. Be clear, gracious, and honest about the Scripture’s doctrine.

Also, be willing to correct false doctrine or poor teaching. People will make mistakes, hurt others, sin, and cause problems. How can this surprise us? But since we are sinners we know that we have made plenty of messes on our own without any help. Instead we graciously help, teach, mend, and shepherd the flock. We don’t place them in a bubble of non-service.

Summary:

The ambivalence that people experience about which church they choose to join, the transience, and the ability to transfer to radically different churches is a symptom of a biblical problem that, generally speaking, needs a major course
correction. We do not need stronger personalities, we need better overseers who guide the church to function as a diverse but interdependent body.

Unity is built around the person and revelation of Jesus Christ. It is hard to imagine anything more Christ-like than to sacrifice yourself for the church. As the body matures together it will gradually “attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” (Eph 4:13) Battling toward Christlikeness as a community, sharing in sorrow, participating in joy, and glorying in others honor will lead to deep commitment to others in the church. Whereas if the church is nothing more than a franchise like McDonalds or Burger King the choice really then becomes one of indifference—whatever suits our tastes. People will choose based items of secondary importance.

** Dangers to Avoid**

- Practically many pastors function as though they do not need the church body to minister to them. They are isolated, lonely, and afraid to have friends or they maintain distance so that others never encourage them.
- Leaders load ministry on a select few whom they trust
- Fear of “giving the keys to the inmates”
- Satisfaction with loyal and regular church members who do not create problems but give faithfully and show up

Faith Questions:

- Do pastors need the church assembly/relationships/fellowship?
- Are you willing to let others minister and risk failing?
- Are you willing to restructure your programs to engage your church in ministry?
- Are you willing to articulate clear doctrine at the risk of losing some?

Recommended Books:

