

“In Case We Get Separated”
1 Corinthians 12:12-31

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¹²For 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. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If the foot would 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. ¹⁶And if the ear would 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. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The 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.” ²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. ²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

When I was a kid—when most of us were kids—we had a familiar conversation with our parents at fairs and amusement parks and stores. “Now in case we get separated, we’ll meet right back here on this spot.” Or, “in case we get separated, let’s all ride the Ferris wheel at 3pm.” Never mind the fact that you were at Great America to have fun and ride as many roller coasters as possible, you could waste hours *just looking for each other* in those days. Think of the time we used to spend just sitting around *waiting* for other people to show up. At the mall, for example, waiting and waiting outside JC Penny, wondering, “Did we say we’d meet *here*, or was it outside Sears?” Back in those days, missed connections had frustrating and time-wasting consequences, and so days of fun or shopping or adventure invariably began with some strategizing: “Now, in case we get separated...”

We’re not so worried about that these days, because these days we have our cell phones, or more precisely, our hand-held mini-computer, walkie-talkie, global positioning devices. We don’t have to worry about getting separated because with these things in our pockets and purses, *there’s no such thing as being separated*. Even when we’re miles apart, we’re just a call, a text, a tweet, an email away.

Of course, the flipside is that we can be in the same room with each other but so totally engrossed *in these phones that we never turn off* that in fact we *do become separated* from each other. Perhaps it's time for a new contingency plan in our own living rooms: "Now, in case we get separated, all electronic devices *will be confiscated* before supper, during which, hopefully, we can find each other once again.

Paul's word to the church in Corinth feels like an "in case we get separated" plan, though in their case, the Corinthians were already struggling to find each other. The Christian Church was just a few decades old at the time, but already, people were divided culturally and theologically. Most of Christ's earliest followers were Jewish, Jesus and the disciples being Jewish themselves, but as the Church grew, it spread beyond Jewish lands and culture and was embraced by many non-Jews, or Gentiles. Paul calls them "Greeks" in his letters.

And here was the burning question of that time in the Christian Church: If a Gentile from, say, Corinth, hears about Jesus Christ and decides to become a follower—get baptized, join the church, sign up for the bell choir, serve on the fellowship committee... you know, the whole nine yards—if a Gentile from Corinth decides to become a disciple of Jesus Christ, *does he also have to become, culturally, Jewish?* Does he have to adopt Jewish customs? Does she have to adhere to Jewish cooking norms? To have faith in Christ, do new Gentile Christians have to follow Jewish purity codes as they are outlined in the Torah? Must the women agree to Jewish expectations of wives? Must the men become circumcised? These were, as you might imagine, pressing questions for Greek converts who loved Jesus Christ but weren't so sure about the other stuff.

I feel like I have this conversation with someone about every few months. "Don't get me wrong," I hear, "I think Jesus is great—*just great*—it's the Church I'm not so crazy about." Ask someone on the street to describe Jesus—and *just to describe Jesus*—and you might hear words like "loving, wise, compassionate, humble." But what if you ask that same person to describe Christians or the Church? A Barna study group did just that a few years back and the responses came in: judgmental, hypocritical, old-fashioned, political, out-of-touch with reality. [1]

Americans in 2013 might have some things in common with the Corinthians: these folks almost 2000 years ago, who liked Jesus just fine—but just weren't so sure about his followers, and were *definitely* not so sure about the Church. Paul's word to the Church in Corinth is an "in case we get separated" word. To the Corinthians he said, "Jews *and* Greeks, in one Spirit we were all baptized into *one body*. And just as the body is one and has many members, we, though we are many *are one in the body of Christ*."

Paul's word to the Church in Racine—to the Church in the world today—is an "in case we get separated" word too... In case we splinter off into a million different churches, in case our churches sag with mistrust and suspicion, in case we find ourselves referring to the Christians in the church next door or down the street as "them" and not "us," in case we feed that perception that exists in our culture of the Church as a fragmented and therefore useless institution... Paul reminds us, "Now, in case we get separated, remember *we, though we are many, are one in the body of Christ*."

Today, after the service, we'll gather for our congregation's 174th annual meeting, and so we'll officially begin in February our 174th year as a church family. It's wild to think about it—all those years. I would doubt that many of us can trace our own families back that far, but here we have in this church a sense of our faith ancestry that goes back to 1839. And, of course, part of what makes 174 significant is that we're just *one year shy of 175*, which we might call our "demisemiseptcentennial." Fortunately we have a year to learn how to say that.

In the meantime, we celebrate 174 years of faith family history, which, when you think about it, *is extraordinary*. So many things fall apart in this world. Since 1939, governments have risen and fallen, companies have opened and closed, ideas and inventions have run their course and become obsolete, but here we are! During the last 174 years, we've stopped using phonographs, film cameras, pay phones, cassette tapes, floppy disks, and paper maps—these things have come and almost completely gone, but here we are.

Why is that? Are we just lucky? No. Are we too big to fail? No. Are we just stubborn? Well, quite possibly, yes. But I would argue that *every time we meet to worship, there lies in the message, in the Scripture, in the song, or in the silence, a little refrain that keeps playing over and over again, "IN CASE WE GET SEPARATED..."*

One Sunday it's a reminder to love one another as God has loved us. The next week it's a choir anthem that moves us to tears. A few days later it's a funeral for a loved one of our own. Today it's that challenging reminder: "Remember, in case we get separated, that we are one in the body of Christ, and that body does not exist as one member, but of many."

Welton Gaddy is the president of the Interfaith Alliance. He's a thoughtful author and preacher and in his work he is mindful of what many scientific scholars have observed, which is that in our biosphere—in this vast and diverse created order of life on this planet—in *our biosphere, independence means death*. "In other words," writes Gaddy, "for life to be a reality, interdependence [not independence, but inter-dependence] is a necessity." [2]

And so friends, we begin another year together with that reminder—that we are interdependent, that though we are many, we are one. We can get antsy about change, we can have our theological squabbles, we can even argue about the color of the carpet or the hymnal. In the end though, we know the truth we have been given—the truth that we have taken part in creating—that we are bound together as one in Christ.

Now, in case we get separated, may God bless us with that memory and that promise.

1. From the 2007 Barna study, "A New Generation Expresses its Skepticism and Frustration with Christianity," (<http://www.barna.org/teens-next-gen-articles/94-a-new-generation-expresses-its-skepticism-and-frustration-with-christianity?q=exclusive>)

2. From Welton Gaddy sermon, "Walking Together," broadcast on Oct. 18, 2009 on *30 Good Minutes*.