I Corinthians 12:27 “Now you are the body of Christ.”

Paul in writing to the Corinthians cites among the sufferings he has endured, his daily anxiety about the churches. And if any church gave him anxiety, it would certainly be the church at Corinth. A careful reading of his letters to the Corinthians indicates a whole series of problems, any one of which it would be enough to destroy any church, one would think. And yet Paul persists in his faith in the power of Christ to unite the people in the spirit of Christ. And so we find along with denunciations of their manifold sins and shortcomings the earliest statement we have on the meaning of the Lord’s Supper. And along with his complaint about the divisions in the church, his magnificent chapter on the meaning of love. Yes, things were bad, and Paul was severe with the people, but the whole tone of the book is Paul’s confidence in the power of the Spirit of Christ to redeem them. Just as Jesus could take simple fishermen and mold them into apostles, so the spirit of the risen Christ can shape the common clay of ordinary and sinful men into instruments of His spirit.

But there is no question about the fact that Corinth was Sin-City. No wonder Paul said he suffered anxiety about its condition. For centuries Corinth had been earning a reputation as a wicked place. Not what was so awful about the city?

Basically, the problem was its location. Corinth was located on the narrow isthmus that separated the northern and southern parts of Greece. All land traffic north or south had to pass through it. And almost all sea traffic east and west stopped at Corinth. To sail around the lower peninsula was a long and dangerous journey. The cape at the southern end, Cape Malea, was as frightening to ancient sailors as Cape Horn at the southern tip of South America was to modern sailors. The Greeks had a saying “Let him who sails around Malea first make his will.” And so most ships stopped at Corinth. There was no canal to sail through - but small boats were trundled overland on rollers, and larger ships were unloaded, and goods carried overland to be stowed on another ship on the other side. A 4 mile overland trip saved over 200 miles of voyage. Corinth was a seaport, then. And seaports are notoriously tough towns. But Corinth had two ports, and so was twice as tough and wicked. It was a crossroads for Greek and Barbarian (the Greek term for anyone who wasn’t Greek) and in Paul’s day for Jew and Gentile. There were several diverse and sometimes hostile groups and Paul’s church drew from all of them. Corinth was famous for its commercial prosperity, it’s sea trade. But she was notorious for debauchery. The very name Corinthian in Plato’s day meant immorality. In the heights of the city was the Temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. There were a thousand priestesses attached to the Temple who functioned as sacred prostitutes and plied their trade in the streets at night. The Greeks had a whole stock of jokes about going to Corinth on business. When Paul inveighed against a whole list of gross sins, he was not exaggerating.
Yet this is where Paul built a church. Not in Athens where the cultivated people lived. We know he preached there, but without success - there is no record of founding a church there. These were the Greeks who according to Paul found the preaching about a suffering God utter nonsense. Gods, by definition are non-suffering and immortal. Perhaps the Corinthians were closer to real suffering and so heard the new message.

But it was not easy to build a church from such materials as a reading of Paul’s letters shows. What was most distressing to Paul was not so much the debauchery and grosser sins - although he condemns this, of course, and he is particularly unhappy that the Lord’s Supper has been made an occasion for eating and drinking.

What really distressed Paul was the spirit of dissension, division, and opposition within the church. When one examines all of the particular problems he addresses, one can see that they are all examples of or causes for divisions in the church. First of all, there are those who are particularly committed to particular preachers or leaders. As Paul complains - you are all saying things like I am of Paul and I am of Apollos, and I am of Cephas and I of Christ. But is Christ divided? The fact of particular loyalties to particular leaders was destroying unified devotion to Christ.

He warns against defiling the body - saying that we are the temples of God and must keep them holy. The old leaven must be cleaned out and a new spirit entered of sincerity and truth. But all of his advice is aimed at unifying the church and overcoming dissension.

For example, there was the problem of neat. The butcher shops were really the backdoor of pagan temples. Meat sold was left over from pagan sacrifices. Now can a good Christian eat that? Paul’s answer is clear - pagan gods have no power so the meat is not defiled - but if eating it is going to cause serious rifts because of the conscience of others, it is better not to eat it. And then there was the question of women in church without covering their hair. There is no question about Paul’s conservative stand on this issue, and Paul can in no way be called a proponent of women’s rights - (Jesus was, though). But it is very clear that Paul is trying to bridge a serious split here, and the conservative solution was to reaffirm the traditional position that women are subject to men. But he ends his discussion with the insistence that both men and women are of God, and rebukes the man who stirs up this issue out of a spirit of contention. There is no place in the church for the deliberately contentious spirit.

The theme of Paul’s writing here is this. The church is a reflection of Christ - it cannot, it must not be divided. Paul asks “Is not the bread which we break a very sharing in the body of Christ? Just as the broken bread is one, so we, though we are many, are one body.” Paul explains to the people how he received from the Lord the account of the Last Supper, in which Jesus breaks the bread, saying “This is my body which is for you; do this that you may remember me.” Similarly, the cup - do this in remembrance of me. Then he warns about those who partake unworthily and bring judgment on themselves. It is easy to imagine Paul here is concerned with gross sins - to suggest one cannot partake if he is not pure. But the Lord’s Supper is for the help of sinners. No - what Paul is concerned about here is this: the unworthy one does not discern the body. He does
not see that the communion service is celebrating, remembering, Christ - and he does not see, discern, that the church is that body of Christ.

This is why Paul explains in such detail how the church is like a body. It has many parts, but one spirit. It is an important and famous concept. The church is a living, organic entity, whose life is more than the sum of its parts. Its body is the body of Christ, and one spirit flows through it, ideally. As Plato pointed out - we do not say, “My finger has a pain; we say I have a pain in my finger.” There is an identity an I that gives unity to the body. The identity that gives unity to the church is Christ.

All the parts are important because they all reflect the spirit of Christ. Just as the self requires all the various parts of the body - the eye cannot say to the hand, I don’t need you - so the various members are all valuable parts of the body of Christ. And if one member suffers, all the other members suffer with it. It’s not just the finger that hurts, as Plato said. And if one member is glorified, says Paul, all share in the joy.

You are the body of Christ, says Paul, and each of you is a member of it. This is the great thought about the church. It is the embodiment of the Spirit of Christ. That is why the church is so much more important than any one of its members or all put together. It is the Spirit of Christ that gives the body life.

There are so many ways to express this spirit. And Paul lists several, showing the importance of each. There are first of all, apostles, the greatest figures in the church. They were the ones who had the closest contact with Jesus in the days of his flesh and the days of his risen power. There are the prophets - these are the preachers. They don’t so much foretell the future but rather tell forth clearly the message of the apostles. There are teachers who had to instruct the fundamental truths. There are helpers - all those who do the work of helping others, caring for the poor, the orphan, the widow and stranger. The church was from the beginning practical. Finally, Paul speaks of the administrators - the Greek word here means pilot or helmsman. It is the word in the famous scholastic honorary society M#5 - M48@F@N\V #4@h 5LS$,DbZJZI - love of wisdom, the helmsman of life. There are those in the church whose job it is to steer the ship through shoals to harbor.

The church has all these members, all these functions, all these tasks - but through them all must be the Spirit of Christ. But the church, we of His church, are His body, if we but discern the body properly.

He has no hands but our hands

To do His work today;

He has no feet but our feet.

To lead to men in His way;
He has no voice but our voice
To tell men how He died

He has no help but our help
To lead them to His side.

That is why Paul tells us the more excellent way to express this spirit, the way of love. For God is love - He so loved the world that He gave His Son - and Christ is love - He gave Himself for us - and we, we as members of the Church of Christ, must unite in love - discern the body - see the church, ourselves, united as the body of Christ.

As we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, let us remember this - and unite in the love of Christ and the fellowship of His Spirit.