

UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

SERIES: LIFESTYLE ISSUES IN THE CHURCH

Doug Goins

In 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 Paul introduced the human body as an illustration of the interrelationship of the members of Christ's body, the church. Paul said in the context of the Lord's Supper, "Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread." From that point on through the end of chapter 12, Paul refers to the human "body" to describe the church sixteen times. It's an important image he wants us to grasp.

We're resuming our study in 12:12. Verses 12, 20, and 27 pick up this theme of the body: "For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ...But now there are many members, but one body...Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it."

I was thinking about the human body last week. It must be the most amazing organic creation in God's whole created order. The human body is marvelously complex, yet it's unified with unparalleled harmony and interrelatedness. It's a unit. We can't subdivide the body into several bodies. If the body is divided, the part that is cut off ceases to function and dies, and the rest of the body loses some of its functions and effectiveness. The human body is immeasurably more than the sum of its parts.

One of the important marks of human maturity and self-awareness is a growing understanding and respect for one's own body. There is a parallel in our spiritual life: As we mature in Jesus Christ, we gain a deeper understanding and a more respectful appreciation for the church, which is the body of Christ.

Now, the image of the body isn't the only one that Paul uses in discussing the church. He also describes the church as a family, an army, a temple, and even a bride. Each one of those pictures has an important lesson to teach us. But in Romans 12, Ephesians 4, and 1 Corinthians 12 Paul emphasizes the church as the body of Christ. And as the human body is one, Christ's body is also one. There are many different Christian congregations, organizations, denominations, agencies, clubs, para-church ministries, and other groups of every sort, but there is only one church, of which every true believer in Jesus Christ is a member.

We learned in our study of 12:1-11 (Discovery Paper 4530) that as members of the body who are growing in spiritual maturity, we are to exercise our spiritual gifts. We learned that every one of us has been gifted by God, and there is tremendous variety in our respective gifting. Every one of us has been given a ministry, a variety of places to serve, tasks that we're called to do, areas in which we're to exercise our gifts, and Jesus Christ as Head of the church is responsible for that. We saw as well that God himself is responsible for the results, the effectiveness of our exercise of ministry. That takes a tremendous weight off of us. We're called to be faithful, and to trust him for the eternal results. We saw that gifts are given not for our personal, selfish pleasure, but always for the good of the whole body. And we also saw how well-organized this distribution process is: All these gifts are given out under the sovereign care and direction of God himself.

Now beginning in verse 12, Paul is going to continue with this theme of the unity of the body and the diversity of gifts and ministries and callings. First of all, we're going to look at the nature of the body: Just what exactly is the body of Christ, and how did we get into the body of Christ? Then we're going to look at two problems that Paul says affect all of us to some degree or other: a sense of inferiority, as if we don't have much to offer the body, and a sense of superiority, as if our gifts are so important that we need not take other brothers and sisters seriously. Finally, at the end of the chapter Paul is going to tie everything together practically and talk about the heart attitude in which we are to express our gifts in ministry.

THE NATURE OF THE BODY

Let's start by looking at the nature of the body of Christ in verses 12-13:

For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Verse 12 says that we are unified in one body, and Paul is so intent on driving home this point of our oneness in the church that he refers to Christ as the church. We can no more separate Christ from his church than we can separate a head from a body and

expect it to have any life.

In Colossians 1:18 Paul says, "[Christ] is also the head of the body, the church...." Whenever Christ is referred to as the Head of the church in the New Testament, it's always in the sense of the mind, the spiritual life, the leadership, or the direction of the church. When a human body loses its mind and its spirit, it ceases to be a living body. It still has physical structure, but it doesn't have life. It's still physically organized, but it's no longer a living organism.

In the Upper Room Discourse the Lord Jesus taught his disciples the same basic truth about the church using another picture: "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing." (John 15:5.) A severed branch is unproductive and dead. That's why the New Testament teaches that we are in Christ and he is in us. He isn't just with his church, he is *in* his church, and his church is in him—we are totally identified with him in the body. All of us together are the church, an organic whole. We're the living manifestation of Jesus Christ that pulsates with the eternal life of God. He functions in the world through us. That's why Paul often describes the church as "those who are in Christ."

In the last message I said the New Testament views the church not as an institution but as an organism. Christ is our invisible Head, and we are his visible body on earth. So how is this organic unity achieved? How did we become a part of this body? That's the message of verse 13: "We were all baptized by one Spirit." Our spiritual baptism by means of the Holy Spirit occurred at our conversion to repentant faith. At that time the Holy Spirit entered us and gave us new life, making our bodies temples of God. So all of us who have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ have experienced this once-and-for-all baptism.

This baptism is not a matter of having a certain level of spiritual maturity, achieving some advanced spiritual state, or receiving a second blessing. Remember, this letter was sent to a church that was badly divided by factions. Paul called them a carnal church. They were guilty of every kind of sin. These people belonged to Christ, but they weren't being obedient to the command of Ephesians 5:18 to be continually filled with the Holy Spirit, or to be controlled by the Holy Spirit. It's tragically possible to belong to the body of Christ and be born again, but to live as if our bodies didn't belong to him. The effects on people around us are horrible if we choose to live that way.

But in spite of that, Paul says that we were all baptized into one body. That's his central point in this verse. It is our baptism with or by the one Spirit that makes the church one body. There are no semi-Christians or partial members of Christ's body. There are no spiritually elite members, and verse 13 makes clear that racial and social diversity doesn't prevent incorporation into this one body. That's the great news.

Now Paul is going to illustrate this theme of unity and diversity in the body of Christ with a unique examination of the human body in verses 14-26. And he is going to address these two separate sinful tendencies I mentioned that we find at work in our hearts as we evaluate our own place in the church and our individual spiritual gifting.

This is a rather silly section of Scripture. The humor here is goofy. Paul has talking hands and feet and heads and eyes in conversation with each other. I have never considered the apostle Paul to be one of the great comedic writers in the Bible. I can't think of any other part of the Scriptures that Paul wrote that's funny. He's intense and passionate and a great scholar, but a humorist he is not! But there's wonderful humor here.

We have a talking foot and ear who feel jealously inferior to a hand and an eye, and they threaten to secede from the body, leaving it unable to walk or hear. Then we have an eye and a head who feel arrogantly superior to the hand and the foot. They think they can get along just fine without them. As I worked through this whole discussion of feet and hands and eyeballs, I thought of the work of Terry Gilliam, the animator who worked with Monty Python. You may remember Terry Gilliam's huge cartoon feet and hands and so on. This section is very Python-esque. I found out last week that the apostle Paul may have had the help of a comic source in what he was imagining, because the Roman writer Livy tells of a story that came from the fifth century BC in which the rest of the body got really frustrated with the stomach because all it did was lie there and accept all the food that they gave it. They started feeling that the stomach wasn't pulling its weight, so they decided to teach it a lesson to get it to do more for the good of the body. They went on strike against the stomach and refused to put food in it. It worked well—so well that the body died.

THE PROBLEM OF FEELING INFERIOR

Let's look at the first problem Paul talks about: feeling inferior. This is one of the reasons some Christians never express their spiritual gifts in ministry. Look at verses 14-19:

For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. And if they were all

one member, where would the body be?

In verses 15-16, twice we see the statement "I am not a part of the body." The perception that they don't really need me or I have nothing to contribute represents the temptation to believe that I really have no gifts or abilities that are worthwhile. So I sit back and let others do the work of ministry. That attitude of the foot and the ear may reflect the sense of some people in our body. You may feel that you don't really matter in our church, that your gifting is inferior and insignificant when compared to that of other people.

The foot and the ear, if we look carefully at the analogy, are jealous of the prominence of the hand and the eye. Look at it from their perspective. All a foot can do is support the rest of the body when it stands up and then cooperate in the body's walking around. And the foot is rarely allowed out in public; it's always covered up with socks and shoes and sort of kept hidden away. Think about the ear. It's nothing more than a receptor, just waiting for sound waves to arrive, and it's not a very attractive receptor at that, so we cover it up with hair or hang attractive jewelry on it to try to make it look better than it really is. No wonder it feels inferior! Neither the foot nor the ear believes it makes much of a contribution in contrast to the hand and the eye. These are a couple of tremendous contributors to the good of the body. The hand gets to touch anything it wants, pick things up and move them around, use tools. When a vote is taken in a meeting, no one ever says, "Raise your foot"; it's always, "Raise your hand." You can make your own list of why the hand is so superior to the foot. And the eye gets to see everything it wants, watch TV, and so on, and it is able to close at night and rest for a good night's sleep.

But Paul makes the point in verse 17 that such thinking is ridiculous. If everybody felt that way in the church, the body would be just one big eye, which could see terrifically well, but it wouldn't be able to hear anything. Or if the body was one giant ear, it would hear very well but it wouldn't be able to smell anything. Paul is parodying those of us who say, "I don't have a certain spiritual gift, so I'm not really a part of the church," or, "My gift is second-rate and unimportant. I've got nothing to offer. So why should I participate?" This section makes clear that in reality everybody is needed, and disclaiming that responsibility doesn't remove it. Drawing back from functioning as part of the body doesn't make us any less a part of the body. Paul says this twice, at the end of verse 15 and at the end of verse 16. There are no inferior or insignificant members of the body of Christ.

We saw in verses 1-11 that every Christian has been given spiritual gifts, which are supernatural capacities to serve others in the body. And verse 18 reminds us that God is the one who gifted and placed the members in the body as he wills. So the quieter, less sensational working gifts, such as helps and giving and mercy, are just as important in the overall scheme of things as the more public speaking gifts or leading gifts. I know men and women in the body here at PBC who have discovered how God has spiritually gifted them, and because of those gifts they have, how much loved they are, who quietly serve in obscurity, faithfully exercising gifts like faith and discernment through fervent intercessory prayer for others in the body. People use gifts of encouragement, exhortation, and wisdom in one-on-one relationships, in small group settings. Those "feet" and "ears" are just as important to the good of the whole here as the more prominent "hands" and "eyes."

THE PROBLEM OF FEELING SUPERIOR

Now beginning in verse 20 Paul is going to address the opposite problem, which is just as ridiculous and dangerous to the health of the body as the first one is. It's the problem of feeling superior to others around us. Look at verses 20-26:

But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; and those members of the body, which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our unseemly members come to have more abundant seemliness, whereas our seemly members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, that there should be no division in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

In verse 21 the statement "I have no need of you" occurs twice. The perception is that we don't really need other people to accomplish ministry, because we're so highly qualified. This is pride, independence, an attitude of exclusivity. It brings us back to Monty Python and the absolute silliness of a self-important eye and head telling a hand and foot that they can get along just fine without them. That is self-deluded arrogance. You can imagine the eye and the head saying, "We don't need the motor skills of you distant members. We can see and think and talk and eat and hear. What essential contributions do you have to offer? We combine the higher senses, the cognitive skills." I have this vision of two feet and two hands taking them seriously and, as in Monty Python, skittering off in different directions, leaving the body sitting there with no hands or feet all day long. About dinner time it realizes it's in big trouble-how is it going to get what it needs to survive?

This issue of autonomy reminded me of a conversation I had last fall with the football coach at Los Altos High School, where our son Micah plays football. Coach Moser was talking about how difficult it is to get kids to come out for team sports like football, basketball, and volleyball, but how amazingly successful the club sports are in a wealthy area like Los Altos. Club sports are golf

and track and tennis and swimming-sports that require individual effort, training, and preparation. You can take private lessons to learn to do all those things, and you can buy your own equipment. It ends up insulating and isolating people and developing a sense of self-sufficiency. These kids who have all the resources don't want to play the team sports; they'd rather excel in a club sport.

It struck me that, sadly, this can happen in the life of the church. We see the same tendencies toward independence. It's fairly common for people who have been gifted with more prominent abilities to become self-sufficient, even selective in who we will surround ourselves with and the kind of friendships we will develop, to become a lone ranger in ministry. And it's very possible, if you've been gifted in a significant way, to overestimate your own importance and to undervalue the contribution of other believers. That is just as grotesque and foolish as the eye's and hand's views of themselves in Paul's analogy.

The reality is that the weaker members are absolutely necessary. That's the point of verse 22. Paul's logic seems to be that some of the more prominently gifted individuals in the church aren't nearly as indispensable as they think they are, and, in contrast, the less notable parts that seem to be weaker (it's a matter of perception) are essential to the life and health of the church. And what Paul does in verse 22-24 is intensify the language and strengthen it as he describes these individuals in the body whom we might judge unimportant or unnecessary for the good of the whole. In verse 23 it's people we've judged to be less honorable, less valuable, or unseemly (unattractive). At the end of verse 24 it's members who "lacked."

We can all be so guilty of this kind of sense of superiority. We look at people based on physical appearance or what they physically have to contribute to the body, and we can make these same kind of ugly judgments of superiority. If we want to avoid dissension in the body, we must repent of any sense of superiority toward other people. The question we ought to ask ourselves is, "Who have we marginalized? Whose quiet, unassuming presence have we ignored or denigrated?"

Verses 25-26 make very clear that if we slight those who have less prominent gifting or ministry, then our church will suffer. We will be spiritually impoverished. The diversity of spiritual gifts leads to disunity when we compete with one another, but this diversity leads to unity when we care for one another. And how do we care for one another? By functioning according to God's will, accepting where he has placed us, being led into ministry that he determines for us, and also by helping one another function as God wills, encouraging one another, praying with one another, listening to one another. If one member suffers, Paul says, it affects us all; if one member is healthy, it helps the rest of us to be strong.

Last week I was involved in a memorial service in which I saw this principle illustrated powerfully. It was for an elderly lady who had died in her eighties. She had spent the last ten years of her life in a wheelchair, a victim of diabetes and a series of strokes that had affected her hearing and vision. Her name was Emma Williams. Emma is the mother of Terry Bates. Terry was involved in music ministry here twenty years ago, and he was part of the intern program as he was caring for his mom. As long as I've known Terry, twenty-five years, he cared for Emma. Terry pastored in music and worship at Central Peninsula Church in Foster City, and then he went to North Valley Community Church in Milpitas. Where he went, Emma went.

If Emma were here among us, it would be very easy to undervalue her, to assume she had very little to contribute. She was an elderly black lady in two predominantly white churches. She wasn't totally "plugged in" during service. As a matter of fact, Dan Griffith, one of the pastors who officiated at the memorial service, said that if Emma was here today, she'd be dozing off every so often, chatting with the people on either side of her, sort of oblivious at times.

But she was also a lady who after the service would tug on Dan's sleeve and either encourage him or correct something in his preaching. She was always very aware. Many people came to the microphone to give testimony to her faithfulness in exercising her spiritual gifts in their lives. They called her a prayer warrior, a woman of vision. She could see things in people that they couldn't see in themselves. A tremendous encourager, she helped young mothers learn how to mother, and loved to hold babies. She would light up the room with her presence. One of the health care workers who cared for her in the rest home the last three years of her life said, "You know, Emma came to a place where old people come to die. But she didn't come to die, she came to serve and share her life and encourage people, and she was serving clear to the end." Again, on the surface, she had very little to offer physically, and yet she was convinced of her giftedness, in love with the Lord Jesus, and expressing those gifts clear to the end. Two different church families rose up together and called her blessed, and said they had a sense of loss that she wouldn't be there any more. It was a powerful lesson for me, a great reminder of the truth that I want you to grasp.

VARIETY OF GIFTS IN THE BODY

Let's quickly touch on the last paragraph, verses 27-31. Paul takes this analogy and applies it practically in terms of gifting and how ministry is to be expressed.

Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues. All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of

miracles, are they? All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they? But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.

Paul reminds these Corinthian believers that individually and collectively they were Christ's very body, the church for whom he died. They were one in him, and so they should be one with each other. He told them in 1:7 that they were not lacking in any spiritual gift. They were perfectly equipped to represent and serve the Lord. As a local congregation they were Christ's body in miniature, a representative of Jesus to all of Corinth. And we can claim the same truth for our own local church. We're fully equipped to serve the Lord right here, just as each of us individually is fully equipped to serve him. We each need the rest of the members around us to complement us, to support us and reinforce us, but we each have received "every spiritual blessing" (Ephesians 1:3) that we need to serve the Lord. So if there is any sense of lack or deficiency, it has to do with our perception of the reality, and our unwillingness to use what he has provided for us.

Paul reviews the spiritual gifts, some of which we looked at in verses 8-11. Again this focuses on God's perfect provision for the church, knowing what is best for the church. (If you'd like to know more about spiritual gifts, you may want to read Ron Ritchie's series *Now Concerning Spiritual Gifts* (Discovery Papers 4476-4481)

Let's quickly summarize the gifts that are mentioned in this section. Paul talks about the gift of apostleship. The original apostles were the church-planters, the foundation on which God built the church. They were eyewitnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They had been personally commissioned, sent forth by Christ to plant the church, to write Scriptures, to formulate doctrine, and their apostolic authority in that setting was attested by signs and wonders, which Paul calls "the signs of a true apostle" (2 Corinthians 12:12). Today we don't have any apostles. But we do have men and women with the same kind of pioneering spirit as church-planters and missionaries who break through new frontiers for God. It's that same apostolic spirit at work. The church still needs that influence today.

The gift of prophecy is mentioned in verses 28-29. We looked at this gift in the last message, and we're going to spend more time on it when we come to chapter 14.

The gift of teaching is mentioned for the first time in verses 28-29. The gift of teaching is always related to the feeding of a local body of believers with expository teaching of the Scriptures. The New-Testament pattern is one in which there are many teachers in any given church. I'm so grateful for men and women here at PBC who are spiritually gifted as teachers of the word of God and who feed us on a regular basis.

In the last message we talked about the sign gifts: the effecting of miracles and gifts of healing.

In verse 28 there is a new gift: administrations, or governing. This is the only place it's mentioned in all of Paul's listings. The word translated "administrations" was used literally to define the helmsman of a big commercial cargo vessel, the pilot who guided or steered the ship. It means directing the life and order of a congregation. This kind of leadership becomes very important when a church is going through rough waters. In one sense the English word administration doesn't do justice to the richness of this word, because we tend to think of administrators as paper-shufflers. This person, in contrast, pays attention to people and the good of the whole in the life of a given church.

Various kinds of tongues and interpretations of tongues are mentioned. We looked at those gifts in the last message, and we'll spend more time on them in chapter 14.

The rhetorical question Paul asks in verses 29-30 makes clear that no one has all the gifts, and there is no one gift that the entire church possesses. Again, God is in charge of the variety of ministries.

Verse 31 simply calls us to respond, to obey: "But earnestly desire the greater gifts." This command is not addressed to individual believers, because we saw last week that each one of us is given by God what he determines is best for us and for the good of the church. It's not a matter of having gifts on demand. But collectively, as the local body of Christ, we ought to desire that the greater gifts of edification and instruction in the word be very evident among us. These are the support gifts: apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers, and pastor-teachers. We need those gifts to be foundational in a church so that the rest of the gifts can flourish and grow and be expressed.

The more excellent way, that last phrase in verse 31, introduces the context in which our gifts are to be expressed: the sacrificial way of *agape* love at work. We'll look at that in chapter 13.

God doesn't want us to sit on our gifts. He wants us to honor one another, to serve one another, and put to work the gifts with which he has so richly endowed us.

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