

1 Corinthians 12.12-31: One Body

The Doctrine of One Body [vv.12-13]

v.12: Paul develops the great theme of *unity* in *diversity* by using the illustration of a human body. It has many “members” (parts) in terms of limbs and organs, but they all form part of one cohesive unit. In making the spiritual application, Paul says “so also is [the] Christ” – a reference to the spiritual body of Christ (the dispensational church) of which He is Head. Believers are one Christ and cannot be separated from Him. JR Caldwell explains, “Does God call us, the members, ‘the Christ’? Yes, for Christ the Head would be incomplete without the members, as the members would be incomplete without the Head! So Head and members together form the ‘one new man’ – the one mystic ‘Christ’.” The background of such an illustration could be the Corinthian *Asclepeion* (healing temple). Many terracotta votive offerings in the form of heads, hands, feet and arms etc. have been excavated from the site. These represented afflicted body parts that had supposedly been healed by the gods. Perhaps the vast array of dismembered limbs reminded Paul of a *disunity* that is the polar opposite of what a local church should be. The rest of the chapter considers the body: *physically* (v.12), *mystically or spiritually* (v.13), *illustratively* (vv.14-26) and *characteristically* (v.27).

v.13: Paul explains how individual Christians came to be part of one (spiritual) body – the church was formed by the baptism in the Spirit on the day of Pentecost (for more detail see Bible Class notes on Acts 2). The church was constituted one spiritual body by being once and for all “baptized” (aorist) ‘in’ [*en*] one Spirit (the element). Whether Jew or Gentile, bond or free, every believer has been united in one spiritual body by a baptism of *Jews* at Pentecost that was extended to *Samaritans* (Acts 8), *Gentiles* (Acts 10) and the *disciples of John* (Acts 19). Note that Paul includes *himself* as well as the carnal Corinthians in the benefits of the baptism, the results of which were reckoned to every believer at conversion. Every believer has also been “made to drink into one Spirit” [NET]. Baptism is *external*, but drinking is *internal*. Thus, in Acts 2 the Spirit “filled all the house where they were sitting” (baptism); but they were also “filled with the Spirit” (drinking). They were *in* the Spirit, and the Spirit was *in* them! This common participation in the Spirit has bound every believer into one spiritual company that constitutes the body of Christ. All this was illustrated in 10.2-4. Israel was corporately baptized unto Moses in the sea and the cloud, forming them into one nation under his authority. Then they all, individually, drank the “same spiritual (supernaturally provided) drink” – the water which flowed from the smitten rock. Like the Spirit, this water gave life and sustained them through the wilderness.

The “baptism in the Spirit” on the day of Pentecost accomplished *two* great things. Not only were Christians (as a body) vitally linked to Christ, the Head, in heaven (Ephesians 1.22-23), but they were also vitally linked to one another as members of a body (12.25-27; Romans 12.5). Therefore, believers are no longer solo individuals but belong to a spiritual *society* and function alongside one another. Furthermore, every member of the body is vital. Though the body can survive without some of its members, its function is *impaired* (less effective) without them.

The Diversity of the Members [v.14]

v.14: Paul returns to the *illustration* of the human body. It is *one* body but has *many* different members (parts). One member by itself, like an arm, is not a body. Without these different parts, each having a different purpose, the body could not function. We can be sure Paul was thinking beyond the analogy to the local assembly in Corinth as he makes the application in v.27. They were “body of Christ” characteristically. So, the “many” different members may have reference to *racial* (Jew and Gentile) and *social* (bond or free) diversity, as well as *spiritual* (variety of gift).

The Discontent of the Members [vv.15-16]

v.15: Each member of the body has an important function and is responsible to exercise that function. Paul represents members of the assembly at Corinth as body parts – the foot, hand, ear and eye. The “foot” is lower than any other member and bears the weight of the body. It expresses discontent, and perhaps envy, as it is not as public, prominent, and dextrous as the hand. With a touch of petulance, the foot declares it no longer belongs to the body. Has it therefore ceased to be a body part? Of course not! **v.16:** Again, the “ear” is envious of the “eye” – it has pride of place in the centre of the face and is beautiful in form unlike the ear. Like the foot, it likewise declares itself not part of the body. The application is clearly to those believers who are resentful of the more prominent and public gifts of others. But refusal to function as part of the body does not resolve from responsibility to do so! No excuse can justify non-participation in the activities of the assembly. Though they might consider themselves of inferior value to others, they are vital for the proper functioning and full health of the body. They have become despondent because of their own perceived unimportance and feel they are not needed.

The Duty of the Members [vv.17-20]

v.17: No *one* member is sufficient, *all* are needed. If the whole body was one “eye”, though it could see very well, it would not be able to “hear”. If the whole body was just an ear, it could hear well but be unable to “smell”. Diversity of gift is therefore essential to the proper functioning and operation of the assembly. If *all* were teachers, who would evangelise? If *all* were speaking in tongues, who would interpret? An overemphasis on one role or function would substantially decapacitate (limit) the body. Every member is essential to function effectively together. **v.18:** There is nothing accidental or haphazard about the human body and its body parts. Each one is specifically and suitably located according to the wisdom and “pleasure” of God. This is also the case in the assembly. Ultimately, it is God who has appointed each member its most *suitable* and *useful* place in the body. To disparage or deny one’s role in the body is to insult God’s wisdom and sovereign choice. God has created a fully functioning and effective unit when each does the work they have been assigned. **v.19:** If all the body’s members were eyes or arms, it would not be a body at all. So, all striving to exercise the same gift (of tongues) is not natural. **v.20:** Rather, ‘as it is’ there are “many members” (diversity) but only one “body” (unity). Diversity of gift was therefore essential to the effective operation of the whole.

Despising the Members [vv.21-22]

v.21: Paul now moves from *underestimating* one’s role and responsibility to *overestimating* it. Those who exercised the gift of tongues may have thought themselves better than others, or at least belonging to a spiritual elite. The “eye” and “head” may represent those who had more prominent (public) gifts, or even the rich with a higher social standing. Clearly the “eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee” for if the eye desires to pick up an object, it requires the hand to move. Likewise, the “head” requires the “feet” to take the body where it desires to go. Thus, saints must not consider themselves so superior that others are surplus to requirements. That is to demean and despise God’s people. **All** are essential. Note. The head and eyes represent what is *contemplative* and *meditative*. Hands and feet suggest *activity* and *service*. Both are required in the assembly else its activities would be disorganised and chaotic (if no head and eyes), or nothing would get done (if no hands and feet)! **v.22:** In reality, the members “which seem to be more feeble” (weaker) are actually “necessary” (essential). For example, internal organs are more sensitive and susceptible to damage, but vital in sustaining life. Appearances, then, can be deceiving. Apparent weakness (in terms of gift or societal standing) has no relationship to real value. MacArthur says, “*The most vital ministries in a church always include some that are not obvious. The faithful prayers and services of a few dedicated saints... frequently are the most productive channels of spiritual power in a congregation.*”

The Dignity of the Members [vv.23-24]

v.23: Continuing the illustration of the human body, Paul divides body parts into *three* groups. Some are “less honourable” (attractive) such as the torso or shoulders. On these we “bestow” (*enclose or place around*) “greater honour” in the form of clothing to make them appear more attractive. Some parts are “uncomely” (shameful, indecent), and these are *always* clothed very carefully. **v.24:** But other parts of the body are “comely”, such as the eyes – these require no special attention or adornment. The perceived ‘comely’ saints could refer to those who had a higher social standing or exercised more public and prominent spiritual gifts like tongues.

In reality, God has “tempered the body together” – a beautiful word meaning to ‘compound’ or ‘blend’ – mixing or combining different parts to assemble a unified whole. The word is used of an *artist* carefully mixing colours to produce an exact shade, or *musicians* skilfully blending their instruments to make a symphony. In so doing, God has “given more abundant honour” to those that feel inferior. He has done this by making them essential to the well-being and proper functioning of the body. Without them, the colour scheme would be bland or garish, and the symphony would be totally off-key! God has therefore “*blended the body together in such a way that every part stands in equal dependence upon the rest. He has made the body one harmonious, mutually dependent whole.*” (RL Thomas)

The Devotion of the Members [vv.25-26]

v.25: The purpose of God’s equalisation of honour in the body is that, *negatively*, there should be no “schism”, and *positively*, there should be mutual concern *by* and *for* every member of the assembly. The word “schism” is elsewhere translated ‘rend’ (as a garment) or ‘division’. It can include the idea of alienation of feeling. Sadly, *doctrinal* and *social* schism did exist among the Corinthians (cf. 1.10-11; 11.18) but if they remembered their mutual dependence on one another, they would be united, recognising that no member is unnecessary or without value. They would also acknowledge the importance of each other, having the same “care” (*worry or concern*) for each member. This is not a superficial or casual concern, but a thoughtful or even anxious compassion for others – and not for *some*, but *all*. There is no partiality. Everyone must be treated the same way. **v.26:** Just as when one member of the human body is *injured* or *infected*, the resulting suffering often affects the whole person. Likewise, individual members are so involved with one another that they react as one to any circumstance. For example, if one member “suffers” by way of adversity or emotional pain, *all* the members empathise and suffer with them. Likewise, if one member is “honoured” in a spiritual

sense by being particularly used or blessed of the Lord, then a common “joy” pervades the whole company. No-one should begrudge the blessing of another or succumb to envy and bitterness.

The Design of the Members [vv.27-30]

v.27: “Now” brings a fitting conclusion to vv.14-26. What is true of the human body is true, by application, of the local church at Corinth, for they were, *collectively*, “body of Christ” and members of that body *individually*. Note that Paul says “ye” not “we” (cp. v.13). There is no definite article and so they are not “the (whole) body of Christ” (the dispensational church) but “body of Christ” *characteristically* and *representatively*. And every one of them was an individual part or member of the body – each bearing an assigned position and responsibility according to divine design.

v.28: Hence, “God hath set” (appointed), according to His own special interest and pleasure, the role of each individual member of the church. The scope of this verse *“extends beyond the local representative body in Corinth to include believers wherever they were located. This broadened sense of ‘church’ is necessary since ‘apostles’ are included in the list.”* (RL Thomas). With the use of “first”, “second” and “third”, Paul draws special attention to three gifted individuals who were essential foundational gifts in the life of the church (cf. Ephesians 2.20). Schreiner notes, *“All the gifts are important and the contribution of every member matters, but some gifts play a more central role than others.”* This is not so much ranking, as indicating a *chronological* and *foundational* priority. Apostles, prophets and teachers were critical to the establishment of local churches within which all the other gifts function. Paul lists *three* gifted men and *five* gifts, *four* of which were not mentioned in vv.8-10. These are “apostles”, “teachers”, “helps” and “governments”. See vv.8-10 or “A Definition of Spiritual Gifts” notes for more detail.

The basic meaning of “apostle” (*apostolos*) is simply ‘one who is sent forth’, in this case, by Christ Himself. They were a corporate body of leaders in the early church carrying great authority. The word ‘apostle’ is used in a technical sense of *official* and *foundational* apostles which included the twelve apostles of the Lamb (Matthias taking the place of Judas Iscariot, cf. Revelation 21.14), James the Lord’s brother (Galatians 1.19) and Paul. The qualifications for such an office were personal commission from Christ Himself (cf. Luke 6.13; Ephesians 1.1; 1 Timothy 1.1) and an eyewitness of His resurrection (cf. Acts 1.21-22; 1 Corinthians 9.1). Paul was the last to meet these qualifications and so there can be no apostles today (1 Corinthians 15.8-9). They were highly gifted men, carrying with them the “signs of an apostle” (2 Corinthians 12.12; Hebrews 2.3-4). There were also apostles in a secondary, more general sense, such as Barnabas (Acts 14.4), Silas and Timothy (1 Thessalonians 2.6) and others (cf. Romans 16.7). These individuals were more like missionaries carrying the message of the gospel.

vv.29-30: Each member therefore has a *different* but *complementary* role to play. Since no *one* gift is possessed by all believers, and no one believer possesses *all* the gifts, it stands to reason that we need one another’s gifts to function properly as a body. To impress the point, Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions to which the implied answer to each is “no”. No, not *all* are apostles. No, not *all* perform miracles. Likewise, no, not *all* are expected to speak in tongues!

The Desire of the Members [v.31]

v.31: Though the Corinthians were eager for the display of the spectacular, Paul exhorts them to rather “covet earnestly” or have an attitude of ‘zeal’ (fervour) for the exercise of the “better” gifts. These better gifts Paul will later define as those, like prophecy, that edify the *whole* church (cf. 14.1-5). Unless there was one to interpret, the gift of tongues was only good to edify the person who spoke. This verse does not mean that individual believers *can* or *should* seek new gifts. Rather, Paul is commanding the Corinthians corporately (the verb is a *plural* imperative) to be zealous to use those gifts which edify, which gifts they already had. The *best* gifts are those that are most *useful* rather than those that are *spectacular*. But, there is a “more excellent” way, one which is ‘beyond comparison’ – it is the way of **love**. The fundamental indication of spirituality is not speaking in tongues, neither is it the spectacular – it is **love** for others! The motivation for the exercise of gift is not self-gratification or glorification – it is **love** for others!