

## XXII. Members of One Body

October 29/31, 2013

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

**Aim:** To appreciate our God-given gifts and those of other Christians, and use them for the mutual encouragement, benefit, and unity of the body of Christ.

Many of the Corinthians had the notion that all Christians should have the same gift and that definite steps could be taken to this end. In the verses preceding these, Paul cogently and powerfully argues that the Spirit of God has placed a great diversity of gifts in the church for her good. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit has done this because it is His sovereign prerogative to do so. It is futile, therefore, to try to dictate to the Holy Spirit regarding spiritual gifts.

In the present passage Paul explains and illustrates the nature and importance of the unity of the church itself, and then again the importance of diversity as a key factor in that unity. The diversity of the church is a God-ordained means of bringing the fellowship to oneness, but unless each diverse member recognizes and accepts his part in the whole body, diversity will divide rather than unite, destroy rather than build up, bring discord rather than harmony, and result in self-serving rather than self-giving.

In this passage, Paul anticipates an objection. He knew some of the Corinthians would be anxious to seize his teaching about diversity and make it into something quite dangerous. In short, he could see them arguing that such diversity would seriously disrupt the unity of the church. In order to head off this response, Paul simply demonstrates that diversity of gifts in no ways threatens the unity of the church but actually enhances and promotes it. He accomplishes this by introducing – historically for the first time in his writings – the human ‘body’ (*soma*) as a picture of the church of Jesus Christ.

Hippocrates, a Greek physician of the fifth century B.C., observed that in the anatomy of a man, ‘All the parts from a whole, and severally the parts in each part, for the work [of the body]. Men have always perceived an extraordinary coordination among the elements of the human frame.

### A. The Unity of the Body (1 Corinthians 12:12-13)

#### 1. One Body (12:12)

<sup>12</sup>*For 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.*

Paul employs the analogy of the human body to drive home the points he has been making about ministry in the church. Remarkably he does not say ‘as the body is one and has many members, so it is with the *body* of Christ,’ but ‘so it is also with *the* Christ.’ Paul is so intent on driving home the point of 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 body from its head. The congregation of believers and the human body are each an entity-in-diversity. Yet diversity within oneness is that of gift and function rather than of status.

Paul presents a powerful image, because we do not think of our physical bodies as made up of many different parts that have come together into some form of constructed unity. The body is one – that is a given – and all the parts serve the whole. Paul wants his readers to think of the church that way. Every Christian, who is, by definition, united to Christ by faith, also belongs to

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every other Christian in the one body of Christ, which is the universal church, expressed in its innumerable local congregations.

### 2. One Spirit (12:13)

<sup>13</sup>*For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.*

#### a) *Unity of the Body*

What is it that unites Christians? Does their unity come from their all being just alike? Paul declares that the real source of unity for Christians is their common spiritual experience. Every member of the body belongs on exactly the same terms.

Through this common spiritual experience, diverse people had been made one. Jews and Greeks had very little in common with each other, but the church of Corinth consisted of people from both cultures. Slaves and free may have had even less in common, but the church of Corinth also had members from both groups. The Jew-Gentile and the slave-free divisions were great in the world of that time. Such distinctions are irrelevant in the church, from God's viewpoint, and so they must not be re-imported into the congregation. There is no way to explain the unity of these people in natural, cultural terms. So how did it come about? Paul says they had all been 'baptized into one body,' and had all been 'made to drink into one Spirit.'

One Spirit baptism establishes one church. There are no partial Christians, no partial members of Christ's Body. The Lord has no halfway houses for His children, no limbo or purgatory. All of His children are born into His household and will forever remain in His household.

#### b) *Baptism in the Spirit*

Immersion into the life of the Spirit, with its consequent membership of the body of Christ, is the experience of the new birth, or conversion. This is what defines the believer as belonging to Christ.

Paul's argument is that membership of Christ's body is a consequence of personal regeneration. The apostle shows his readers that they are one because of their individual Spirit-baptisms. It follows that Paul asserts that the Corinthians, and he himself, have been baptized 'in' the Spirit by the Lord into His 'body,' the church, the apostle's motive being to demonstrate that although the people possess differing gifts, they enjoy a fundamental spiritual unity.

The church is formed as believers are baptized by Christ with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the agent of baptism but Christ is the baptized (Mt. 3:11; cp. Mk. 1:8; Lk. 3:16; Jn. 1:33). It should be noted that the phrase 'baptism of the Holy Spirit' is not a correct translation of any passage in the New Testament, including this one. *En hen pneumati* ('by one Spirit') can mean 'by or with one Spirit.' Because believers are baptized by Christ, it is best to translate this phrase as 'with one Spirit.' It is not the Holy Spirit's baptism but Christ's baptism *with* the Holy Spirit that gives us new life and places us into the Body when we trust in Christ.

It is not possible to be a Christian and not be baptized by Christ with the Holy Spirit. Nor is it possible to have more than one baptism with the Spirit. There is only one Spirit baptism, the baptism of Christ *with* the Spirit that all believers receive when they are born again.

At their initiation *all* believers were immersed in the *one* Spirit and drank of the *one* Spirit and so became members of 'the Christ,' His assembly. Here the Spirit is not the divine agent who does

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the baptizing but the figurative ‘fluid’ into which believers are plunged and from which each drinks. For this reason, each member has a ‘manifestation’ of the Spirit in ‘gifts’ that are now expressed by each person.

### (1) Not Water Baptism

Parenthetically, it should be noted that Paul is not speaking here of water baptism. Water baptism is an outward, physical ordinance believers submit to themselves and which is performed by other believers, in obedience to Christ’s command (Mt. 28:19; cp. Acts 2:38). Water baptism plays no part in conversion, but is a testimony to the church and to the world of conversion that has already taken place inwardly. Spirit baptism, on the other hand, is entirely the work of God and is virtually synonymous with salvation.

The statement, ‘For we also were baptized in one Spirit,’ does not relate to water. Paul is not referring to his baptism by Ananias or to baptisms at Corinth. If baptism in water were meant, he would have written, ‘For we were all baptized into one body,’ leaving out any reference to the Spirit. Therefore, baptism in the Spirit is the initiating work of the Spirit that brings the people of God to life and to their essential unity. Baptism in water follows.

### (2) Not a Second Spirit Baptism

Water baptism is an outward sign of an individual’s initiation into the eternal life of God, through faith in Jesus Christ. Neither here nor elsewhere does Paul teach that Spirit-baptism is a second separate experience subsequent to the new birth. It *is* the new birth; common to all who believe in Christ and are saved.

Paul’s central point here is that baptism with the one Spirit makes the church one Body. If there were more than one Spirit baptism, there would be more than one church, and Paul’s whole point here would be destroyed. He is using the doctrine of baptism with the Spirit to show the unity of all believers in the Body. Many erring teachers today have used a wrong interpretation of the baptism with the Spirit to divide off from the Body an imagined spiritual elite who have what the rest do not. The idea violates the whole teaching here.

Some would have us believe the baptism of the Spirit is an experience that takes place after conversion. They argue that there are really two groups of Christians: those who have been saved but are not baptized by the Spirit, and those who are not only saved but also baptized. Christians in the first group supposedly live spiritually anemic lives and have carnal ways, while Christians in the latter view cite the example of the Samaritans (Acts 8:5-17) and the Ephesians (Acts 19:1-7). In each case, it appears that some who already knew Christ received the baptism of the Spirit subsequent to their conversion.

This two-tiered concept completely ignores the whole point of Paul’s argument here. He stresses the word ‘all’ in talking about this baptism of the Spirit. If this baptism is an experience only a few Christians have, Paul certainly slipped up in appealing to this as the source of their unity.

But how do we explain the cases of the Samaritans and the Ephesians? These were special cases and should in no way be taken as examples of the normal Christian experience. In the case of the Samaritans, God delayed the granting of the Spirit until Peter and John arrived. Why? So the rift that had existed for centuries between Jews and Samaritans would not be carried over into the church. In the case of the Ephesians, a close study of their replies to Paul’s questions reveals that

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they had never truly been saved in the first place. They received Christ then and there, and the Holy Spirit came upon them at the very same time.

### *c) Drinking of the Spirit*

When we were born again the Lord not only placed us into His Body, but placed the Holy Spirit in us. At salvation we are ‘all made to drink of one Spirit.’ We are in the Spirit, who is in us. Just as there are no partially saved Christians, there are no partially indwelt Christians. Like being baptized with the Spirit, being indwelt by the Spirit is virtually synonymous with conversion. It is a separate facet of the same glorious, transforming act.

It is obvious that the baptizing and drinking are equivalent expressions: Paul is talking about the same spiritual experience. To be baptized is to be completely immersed or submerged in water, and to drink is to take water into our bodies. By using these two terms Paul was saying the Corinthians had been incorporated by the Spirit into the body of Christ and at the same time had been filled with the Spirit.

### *d) The Unity of the Church*

Paul’s point, then, is that there was no need for the Corinthians to worry about the diversity of gifts fracturing their unity because their unity lay elsewhere – in their common experience of being placed in the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit and in receiving the Holy Spirit.

The Corinthians had things the wrong way around. They believed that the so-called ‘more spiritual’ gifts like tongues speaking were evidence of a greater portion of the Spirit. Not so, says Paul. From their immersion in the Spirit and their draught from the Spirit, each has gifts from the Spirit, though, as Paul now proceeds to say, those gifts are not the same.

Whatever diversities of gifts and operations God may choose to give to different members of the body, they are never to be used to fragment the given unity. We are all saved by the same gospel, indwelt by the same Spirit and members of the same body. But diversity is the problem at Corinth, and to this Paul now turns.

## **B. The Diversity of the Body (1 Corinthians 12:14-26)**

The Corinthian church, as many churches today, was divided where it should have been unified and tried to be uniform where it should have been diverse. On the one hand it was divided, for example, over leadership (1:12), when it should have been unified under the perfect leadership of Jesus Christ, their Lord. On the other hand, the members tried to be alike in all having certain spiritual gifts, especially the showy ones such as speaking in tongues, instead of being glad for and faithfully using the many diverse gifts the Lord had given them.

We can see from Paul’s words that two very damaging attitudes about the gifts were running loose in the church. Paul has to deal with two equal, but opposite, errors. The first of these attitudes was one of inferiority, while the second was one of superiority.

### **1. Members Are Not Inferior (12:14-20)**

#### *a) The Body Consists of Many Members (12:14-17)*

<sup>14</sup>For the body does not consist of one member but of many. <sup>15</sup>If the foot should 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.

<sup>16</sup>And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would

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*not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>17</sup>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?*

The thrust of verse 12, which stresses that the numerous parts of the human frame constitute one body, is reversed, it being emphasized that unity is not drab uniformity. In that each ‘member,’ or organ, possesses a unique function, and because the frame consists of ‘many’ parts, the ‘body’ is well able to perform numerous operations. Similarly, because Christians are united to Christ, they belong to one another and therefore have the potential to achieve much for the Lord.

Some in the church considered their gifts to be very modest and were essentially saying, ‘They don’t need me.’ Paul ridicules this notion by imagining a conversation between various members of the human body. It seems that Paul had an impish sense of humor. Paul begins by thinking aloud the thoughts of lesser members who feel they do not belong to the body, a foot because it is not a hand, and an ear because it is not an eye. Paul replies that the body needs all its parts. With a touch of humor he replies that a body consisting only of an eye could not hear, or a body that was one large ear could not see. Paul’s words serve to comfort those who feel inferior while introducing a note of humility for the high-minded.

Every part of the body has its own function and its own unique contribution to the body. No one part can be the whole body or there would be no body (v. 19). And every part is needed, so no individual member should suffer from an inferiority complex because they are not the whole body, or not similar to other parts of the body. By analogy, the Corinthians need one another if they are to fulfill themselves in Christ.

With there being such an emphasis on gifts, especially of the more spectacular kind, it is likely that some Corinthian believers who did not have those gifts were inclined (and perhaps encouraged) to feel very inferior. This in turn could lead to envy, discontent, and division. The foot and the ear are not able to perform the complicated functions of the hand or the eye, but where would the body be without them? No member of the body can perform another part’s task. If the ear cannot see, neither can the eye hear! Similarly, in the church all the different functions are needed; they all matter. Yet how many Christians are there who feel their gifts to be inferior to others? They imagine that they have little or nothing to contribute; that others are more gifted and therefore more spiritual – a conclusion that Paul will not allow.

Many of the Corinthians were unhappy with their gifts. Envy is a sure sign of carnality, and it seems that everyone wanted a gift that someone else had. It is almost certain that, had the gifts been changed to suit the complainers, their reactions would have been the same. Selfishness is never satisfied and envy is never content. Envy is also frequently petulant and pouting. If it cannot have its own way it takes its marbles and goes home, and will not play with the others. That is what some of the immature believers in Corinth were doing. But disclaiming responsibility does not remove it. Refusing to function as part of the body does not make us any the less a part of the body or any less responsible for ministering within it. We have no right to remove ourselves from our God-given responsibilities just because we are dissatisfied with what we are and what we have.

*b) God Arranges the Many Members (12:18-20)*

*<sup>18</sup>But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. <sup>19</sup>If all were a single member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup>As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.*

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These negative illustrations lead to a positive affirmation. Designer distinctions within the body have given rise to a corporate existence, and corporate existence confirms mutual need: the Creator did not integrate the parts of the human frame for them to operate in isolation. Paul's burden is that arrogance will complain that it is unfair not to be gifted in the same way as others, an attitude that can cause much damage.

English translation cannot do justice to the form of the verb 'appointed' ('chose'), which in Greek has the nuance 'for God's *own purposes*.' Let each member of the body, no matter how seemingly unimportant, be encouraged. Each has a special place in the body of believers as personally appointed by God.

Carry over this imaginary conversation of the body into the church, and suppose each member could choose the gift he most wanted. What would the church be like? Great numbers of people would be doing one or two things while untold numbers of tasks would be left undone. Therefore, the Holy Spirit determines who gets what gift in order to ensure the work of the church gets done. And that is why no one needs to feel inferior about his or her gift. Each person and each gift is placed in the church by God Himself for a purpose; each is necessary. Although some gifts are not as important as others, all are necessary.

Discontentment with their spiritual gifts, however, was much worse than lack of common sense. By wanting gifts they did not have, the Corinthian believers questioned God's wisdom and goodness by implying He had made a mistake. They also opened themselves up to fleshly and demonic counterfeits. Their primary problem was not intellectual but spiritual. They did not see their gifts rightly because they did not see the sovereign God rightly. They had not received their gifts by accident or whim. Questioning our spiritual gifts is questioning God, and not using our spiritual gifts is disobeying God.

A Christian who does not have a ministry is a contradiction. He is disobedient and denies God the right to use him in the way He intends and for which He has gifted him. When we refuse to follow God's will and God's plan we deny His authority and Lordship as well as His wisdom and goodness. As members of Christ's Body we are not to do our own will but the Lord's. God has created us, re-created us, placed each of us in His body exactly where He wants us to be, and equipped us to do exactly what He wants us to do.

Because they were discontent and disobedient the Corinthian believers were also unproductive. They did not use the gifts they had, and, in light of Paul's repeated emphasis in 12:4-11 that every Christian is gifted, it seems apparent that some thought they did not have a gift at all. In any case their gifts either were not being used or were being misused.

A body that has only one part would not be a body. A church whose members all had the same gift and the same ministry would not really be a church. It is foolish and immature not to be content with or use what the Lord has given us. His design for the church is perfect and His gifting of the church is equally perfect.

Paul closes his first argument in verse 20 by reiterating verses 12 and 14. Paul insists that the many elements within the human body give rise to perfect efficiency, diversity being the servant of unit. This serves as an introduction to verses 21-26 and an elaborate development of the metaphor.

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### 2. Members Are Not Superior (12:21-26)

#### a) *The Body Consists of Many Members (12:21-24a)*

<sup>21</sup>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.” <sup>22</sup>On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, <sup>23</sup>and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unrepresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, <sup>24</sup>which our more presentable parts do not require.

#### (1) Interdependence, Not Independence

In the previous section (verses 14-20), Paul addressed members in terms of being more gifted and less gifted. In these verses, however, he speaks in socio-economic terms of ‘weaker members,’ ‘less honorable members,’ ‘unrepresentable and representable members,’ and ‘inferior members.’ These are thinly veiled references to disparities of wealth and status within the congregation of Corinth. Pointing to ‘less honorable’ parts of the body, when read alongside other parts of the letter, reveal the apostle’s concern for the disadvantaged and marginalized members of Corinthian society who were part of the assembly of Christ. Paul does not advocate a leveling of the rich and poor, but rather an attitude of respect and honor by those who were exalted towards those who were lowly.

But if one danger of the diversity of gifts is that some feel inferior and imagine that they have nothing to contribute to the body, a second is that others may develop a superiority complex, which in effect says to other members, ‘I have no need of you.’ This is equally disastrous. The mistake once again is that of comparing oneself with other Christians. In one situation it leads to discouragement and envy, and in the other to pride and complacency. Both injure the body, and both are wrong.

Those with an attitude of superiority were essentially looking down at others and saying, ‘I don’t need them.’ Paul combats this attitude by simply staying with his analogy of the human body. He admits some members of the body ‘seem to be weaker,’ and some parts need to be clothed and adorned to make them more attractive. But that doesn’t change the fact that each part is necessary and plays a valuable role.

God has made all of His creation interrelated, especially mankind, whom He has made in His own image. The attitude of independence is much worse in the church, whose members have a common Savior and Lord and a common spiritual body. That attitude of independence was common in the Corinthian assembly. A few prominent and gifted members acted as if they were self-sufficient, as if they could carry on their ministries and daily Christian living completely by themselves or with only a few select friends. They overestimated their own importance and underestimated that of other believers.

One attribute of the human body is that its parts serve one another. Each member accepts that it depends upon every other part. There are no exceptions. Paul’s shaft was undoubtedly aimed at some who valued the church, yet felt themselves superior in some way, such as, perhaps those who appeared at the Lord’s Table with ample provisions (11:22). Or is he also attacking cultural differences, which some may have been unwilling to discount? (see 12:13).

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### (2) Weaker, But More Honorable

Doubtless the more ‘gifted’ Christians at Corinth were assumed to be those with the more spectacular gifts, which put them in the public limelight. They became the spiritual personalities within the congregation and began to regard other members as unnecessary. Against this, the apostle argues on two grounds, still using the body metaphor. First, the body needs them all and so their apparent strength is no indicator of their significance (v. 22). Secondly, human dignity requires us to clothe the least presentable parts of the body with covering, both for decency and protection (v. 23). They are not to be dismissed or ignored. This is the only way in which the body can function healthily as an entity.

People normally exercise decorum by covering those areas of their bodies that they reckon to be ‘more dishonorable.’ This means that ‘undignified members [certain parts of the body] have greater dignity,’ in that distinction is bestowed upon them by means of clothing. ‘Undignified’ means ‘indecent’: whereas garments dignify, nudity shames (cp. Gen. 3:17). Being discreet, Paul does not specify, but sexual organs are probably intended: what ought to be covered is covered. Therefore, because some areas of the body are accorded greater attention than others by the bestowal of clothing, the Corinthians must conclude that the apparently less prominent members of their church are no less honorable than those who strive to be visible or – with respect to tongues – audible.

The less noticed parts (internal organs) ‘seem to be weaker’ than much of the rest of the body (external limbs), but they are also more ‘necessary.’ Consequently they are more guarded by the skeleton and the rest of the body. They are more vital and more vulnerable, and are therefore given more protection. You can live without legs, but not without lungs.

‘Less honorable’ probably refers to the parts of our body that are not particularly attractive. It seems best to see this as referring to the torso in general—the part on which we hang clothes. It might include flabby thighs or a paunch, but it is usually covered and considered less attractive. The use of the verb *peritithēmi* (‘bestow,’ literally ‘to put around’) suggests the idea of clothing the body in general. ‘Unseemly’ (*aschēmōn*) means shameful, indecent, or unpresentable, and here refers to those parts of the body that are considered private and to be covered.

In that external parts of the human body which will attract shame if exposed are dignified by clothing, those which are intrinsically elegant do not need apparel, the result being that all the members manifest their own peculiar dignity. It ought to be so in the church.

Those who have the more noticeable and attractive gifts are the more ‘seemly members [who] have no need of’ encouragement and protection. Honor comes to them almost as a matter of course, and that honor they should share with members whose gifts and temperaments are less attractive and more likely to be ignored. They should give ‘more abundant honor to that member which lacked.’ It is clear from what Paul says in the present text that heavenly reward will be based not only on what we do with our own gifts and ministries but on our attitudes toward and support of the gifts and ministries of other believers.

#### *b) God Arranges the Many Members (12:24b-26)*

*But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it,<sup>25</sup> that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.<sup>26</sup> If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.*



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It is God who has ‘given greater honor to that which lacks.’ What this ‘greater honor’ might be is uncertain, unless the apostle means that tongues speaking is somehow less important than the other charismata. In any case, the Corinthians are to infer that in God’s plan each member of their church contributes to the good of the whole, and that all should be concerned for one another.

Happily, the body has been designed in such a fashion that there is always mutual involvement. Thus it is in principle with the church: those who exercise spiritual gifts do so for the benefit of a ‘body’ which God has designed with meticulous care. For this reason there should be neither elitism nor jealousy. Why should the Corinthians fragment themselves because of God’s good gifts?

Paul gives a twofold purpose, one negative and the other positive, in urging the great to respect and honor the little. Negatively Paul is determined that there should be ‘schism in the body’ based on wealth, status, or education. But this is, in effect, what he had been so concerned about when the wealthy members failed to wait for the poorer members at the gathering for the Supper of the Lord (11:17-22, 27-34). Positively, he urges that the members, whoever they are in in whatever station, should have the same ‘anxiety’ (literally) for each other.

In the human body, the more attractive, presentable parts don’t look down with disdain on the less attractive, unpresentable parts. Instead, the parts function as a whole, and when one part hurts, the whole body hurts; when one part experiences pleasure, the whole body feels pleasure.

This is the way the church should function. Even if we are granted gifts that place us in the forefront of the church’s life and ministry, we have no right to take any of the other members of the church for granted. God has placed each person in the church and gifted each person, and we need each other!

Just as the body, then, has diverse members and yet is one, so it is with the church. Diversity does not threaten the church. The church needs it and thrives on it! But the attitudes of inferiority and superiority will threaten and destroy any church. So let’s dispense with the ‘They don’t need me’ and the ‘I don’t need them’ attitudes and get on with the business of living and ministering for the Lord to whom we belong.

Whenever inferiority or superiority prevails, the church is less than God intends it to be. He has organized the church in unit, and appointed its different members to different task. That is why the implications of how Christians treat one another *within* the church have such a profound effect on those *outside* it. The authenticity of the gospel is at stake.

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 27-31a.