

## #23 Bible Study~05-28-21~1 Cor. 12.12-31a

### ONE YET MANY: THE HUMAN BODY & THE CHURCH (12:12-31a)

How then are we to think of the assembly of believers? Here Paul introduces—historically for the first time in his writings—the human ‘body’ (Gk.: ‘sōma’) as a picture of the church of Jesus Christ. Paul employs the analogy of the body to drive home the points he has been making about ministry in the church (vs. 4-11).

Paul is not alone in his appeal to the metaphor of the human body. Four centuries earlier Socrates, in his picture of ‘the best governed state,’ appealed to the example of the human body where the pain of one ‘member’ is suffered by all. During Roman republican days the ordinary ‘members’ of the ‘body’ politic were discontented because they worked hard for no other reason than to swell ‘the belly’, a reference to the rich patricians.

Arguing for the status quo, Menius Agrippa countered that the ‘members’ depended on the ‘belly’ for nourishment; let them be content! In the second century AD the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius urged against divisive nationalism using the example of the human body as a picture of the Roman Empire. A hand, once severed, he warned, cannot be rejoined to the body.

How, then, does Paul use this popular analogy of the human body? The most fundamental difference is that while others pointed to the community at large, Paul was speaking about the Christian community, i.e. the body of Christ.

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’. This is striking, to say the least. ‘The Christ’ (‘the Messiah’) probably means ‘the people of the Christ’, or ‘the messianic community’. The congregation of believers and the human body are each an entity-in-diversity.

What, then, is the source of the unity, a unity Paul says transcends ‘Jews and Greeks, slaves and free’. The Jew-Gentile and the slave-free divisions were great in the world of that time. His opening words of verse 13 (‘For in one Spirit’) are emphatic: “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.”

At their baptism 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 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’ which are now expressed by each person.

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. The one test of the Spirit’s presence is the acknowledgment, ‘the Lord is Jesus’, (review comments on 12:1-3). From their immersion in the Spirit and their drink from the Spirit, each has ‘gifts’ from the Spirit, though, as Paul now proceeds to say, those gifts are not the same.

### THE NECESSITY OF DIVERSITY (12:14-20)

This passage is an inclusio ‘framed’ between similar sounding sentences: ... the body is not made up of one member but many (v. 14); and ... there are many members but one body (v. 20)

Within this ‘frame’ Paul begins (vs. 15-16) 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 (v. 17) 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. Marcus Aurelius the Stoic philosopher said, ‘If you

leave you won't be allowed back,' but Paul the Christian said, in effect, 'Don't go, the rest of the body needs you!'

Paul concludes in v. 18: 'But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.' (ESV) English translation cannot do justice to the form of the verb 'arranged' 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 divine person—God, the Lord and the Spirit—has 'gifted' each member and 'appointed' each 'member' for a distinctive ministry to the whole, 'just as he has decided.' Each has a special place in the body of believers as personally appointed by God.

#### INTERDEPENDENCE OF THE MEMBERS OF THE BODY, RICH AND POOR (12:21–26)

In the previous section (verses 14–20) Paul addressed 'members' in terms of being more 'gifted' and less 'gifted.' In verses 22–24, however, he speaks in socio-economic terms of 'weaker members,' 'less honorable members,' 'unpresentable and presentable members,' and 'inferior members.' These are thinly veiled references to disparities of wealth and status within the congregation at Corinth. Paul's language echoes his earlier reference, on one hand, to 'the wise,' 'the powerful,' 'those of noble birth,' and on the other hand, to 'the foolish,' 'the weak,' and 'those of lowly birth' (cf. 1:26–29). It is clear from the letter that there were 'those who had nothing' but also the wealthy (11:22), slaves as well as free people (7:22).

Again with a hint of humor (see v. 17) he points to 'less honorable' parts of the body which, he says, we cover up, investing them with greater honor thereby. These words, when read alongside others in the letter reveal the apostle's concern for the disadvantaged and marginalized members of Corinthian society who were part of the 'assembly of Christ.'

The majority in the congregation are 'nobodies', he told them, 'to shame the great of this world' (1:26–29). 'Those who have' are to wait until the arrival at the Lord's meal of 'those who have nothing' (11:22, 33). Those who are 'less honorable,' 'unpresentable,' 'inferior' are to be given greater honor within the gathering of Christ's people. The slave, he told them earlier, is now the 'Lord's freedman' (7:22).

Paul's inversion of values placed on people—then and now—may reveal something of his own pilgrimage. As a 'free born' and therefore wealthy and educated citizen of Rome, and an eminent younger Pharisee, Paul was located in the upper social, economic and educational echelon. But now, as a man 'in Christ' crucified his care and commitment extended to the 'weak,' the 'poor' and the slave (cf. 8:9–12; 11:22; 2 Cor. 11:29; Philemon. 15–16). Paul exercised his ministry as an apostle of Christ in the 'meekness and gentleness' of his Master (2 Cor. 10:1).

Accordingly, he urged that 'weaker' members are 'indispensable' within the body of Christ and that the 'less honorable' are to be treated with 'greater honor.' Paul does not advocate a 'levelling' of the rich and poor, but rather an attitude of respect and honor by those who were exalted towards those who were lowly. Paul gives a twofold purpose, one negative the other positive, in urging the great to respect and honor the little.

Negatively, Paul is determined that there should be 'no division in the body' (v. 25) 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). Paul's was a deep concern for the spiritual and practical unity of the local congregation.

Positively, he urges that the members, whoever they are and in whatever 'station', should have the same 'anxiety' (literally) for one another. How revolutionary these words are. The poor and the weak are not inclined to feel any concern for the rich and powerful, but rather to resent them. Equally, the powerful tend not to spare too much thought for the weak. Moreover, they would find it remarkable if the poor and weak felt or showed 'anxiety' for them. The divide between wealth and poverty, power and impotence was great in antiquity and,

despite all the efforts of modern political idealism, remains great. But Paul will not allow that divide to separate member from member in the body of Christ.

Such is to be that unity in the people of the Messiah that 'If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Socrates said something like this was a mark of his ideal society, but with one major difference. In Socrates' Republic slaves were not citizens. In the body of Christ the King, however, the free, eminent and powerful were to respect those 'below' them and to demonstrate, but also reciprocally accept, concern, so that the sufferings of one, whoever he or she might be, would become the suffering of all.

Readers must decide whether Paul's portrayal of life together 'in the body' has been true to their experience. From my understanding of Christian history it hasn't happened very often. Whatever the truth has been there is no doubt it is Paul's charter for relationships between believers, rich or poor, clever or dull, powerful or weak. The truth of the gospel of Christ crucified and risen is to find a Christ-like pattern of expression socially within the gathering of believers.

It happens to be the case, also, that Paul's vision for the society of Christians is also a worthy vision for society at large. How much to be preferred is that society where the lesser members find respect from the greater, where the sufferings of the one become the sufferings of the whole, where the strong care for and offer protection to the weak. However, modern societies are now set on another course, away from Christ and his kingdom and its values.

Uncannily the mores of the Graeco-Roman world of apostolic times are re-emerging. We can expect deepening rifts within society based on money and power. But that will only provide the people of the King with an opportunity to show the nature of a true society in the patterns of their life together.

#### GIFTS IN THE CHURCH (12:27–30)

Throughout the whole of chapters 12–14 he is addressing the vexing question of 'the spiritual things', that is, 'tongues-speaking.' He began (12:1–3) by reminding them of their previous bondage to 'voiceless' idols in the temples where they heard the cursing of Jesus. But by the power of the Holy Spirit they have now been set free in the Christian assembly to confess that the 'Lord is Jesus'.

Then he expanded their understanding about godly activities (12:4–11). These issue from three-sources, corresponding with the active involvement of the Spirit, the Lord and God, and not the Spirit alone. Above all, these activities are from God (not from your-self) and they are 'ministries' exercised for others (not for one-self).

To explain how each 'member' is 'gifted' by God for ministry Paul uses the image of the Spirit of God as a bath into which all have been plunged and from which each has drunk (12:12–13). Lest the readers lapse into free-wheeling individualism in their use of 'gifts', Paul teaches that each believer is a 'member' of the one body, 'the body of Christ' (12:14–26). To encourage the lowly while humbling the haughty, Paul insists that God appoints the 'members', each and every one of whom is indispensable. Furthermore, in this messianic body, the weak are to be honored and the pain of one is to be the pain of all.

Now, having hinted that some 'gifts' are 'higher' than others, he proceeds to set out a statement of their relative importance. But first he must insist upon the fundamental unity of the 'members' in the one 'body':

The plural pronoun 'you' appears for emphasis at the beginning of the sentence. In other words, you Corinthians are not to think of yourselves first of all as separate, individual members. Rather, first and foremost you are 'the body of Christ', a plural entity which is 'one', a unity. This is the divine reality which they are to grasp and live by. They are to become in practice what they are by the grace and mercy of God.

Now follows his list setting out his evaluation of the relative importance of various ministries within the church (verses 28–31). In passing we must note that the list is by no means complete, as is evident in his words, ‘God has appointed some in the church ...’ Other edifying activities are readily imagined. Nonetheless, the three leading ‘gifts’ which are specifically numbered are critical to the health of any church at all times and places (verse 28a, b, c).

By ‘apostles’ Paul means that select band of the Twelve plus others like himself and James (see on 15:5–11). These are the ‘ambassadors of Christ’ (2 Cor. 5:20) who first preached the gospel and established churches like the one in Corinth. Such an ‘ambassador’, however, also bore the ‘authority’ of the Lord (2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10) to instruct in true doctrine including correcting error, a ministry we see Paul exercising in this present letter.

For us now we have the ‘apostles’ in their writings preserved in the New Testament whose words, borne by the Spirit, must continue to rule our churches. Apostles belong to that brief generation following Jesus. After that, apostleship in persons ceased but was transferred to the canonical texts of the New Testament.

‘Prophets’ and ‘prophecy’ articulated the word of God by evident fervent inspiration of the Spirit (cf. 1 Thess. 5:19–20). The prophet was a man (or woman—cf. 11:5) of strong faith (Rom. 12:6). The impact of the prophets’ words brought ‘upbuilding, consolation and comfort’ to members of the assembly (14:3), but also the radical conversion of the visiting outsider (14:24–25).

Prophets also recognized and discerned alien spirits in others (verse 10). ‘Prophets’ and ‘prophecy’ did not cease with the apostolic age, though—it seems to me—God only raises up such inspired leaders occasionally. ‘Teachers,’ however, are the staple of ongoing Christianity. The teacher ‘pastors’ the congregation as he teaches the faith ‘once delivered to the saints’, whether to the new convert or to the long-term member. Initially the teacher was a catechist who explained and reinforced the oral tradition in the time prior to access to written texts (cf. Gal 6:6). As such scriptures became available the teacher’s work was to read, apply and teach those texts to the people (see 1 Tim. 4:13).

So important is this ministry, that of the various charismas in the church the teacher alone (apart from the apostle) is expected to lay aside his employment and be paid for his work (Gal. 6:6; 1 Cor. 9:3–14; 1 Tim. 5:17–18). Although Paul stops counting with, ‘third, teachers,’ he continues with other Spirit gifts that are prefixed with ‘next ... next.’ There is no one specific gift list because there are varieties in these lists.

They were mentioned earlier (cf. vs. 9 & 10), where they were also bracketed together. Most probably the ‘miracles’ included ‘gifts of healing’. These come immediately after the ‘word’ ministries—‘apostles’, ‘prophets’ and ‘teachers’—and begin a set of ‘practical’ activities for the needs of others. In a pre-medical era nothing was more ‘practical’ than ministering to the sick. It is likely that Christians were driven to prayer in the face of illnesses and disease.

It may have been the case that, in response, God chose to work ‘miracles ... of healings’ among his people. Such miracles were recorded in the centuries following. In the mid-third century Origen wrote: ‘Traces of those signs and wonders are still preserved among us who regulate their lives by the teaching of the gospel.’

At the same time believers applied themselves to ‘healings’, to simple nursing care and practical health and, in time, to the development of hospitals. In the next two centuries Christian numbers grew dramatically while the population of the wider Roman Empire declined. This was due to Christians’ concern for care of their sick members so as to preserve life, on the one hand, and the lack of such care by others within the Empire, on the other hand. Paul’s words here are a good reason to regard medical care as a high calling for Christians.

The following items are not numbered and I don’t believe Paul wants us to rank them. That is why he simply said ‘next ... next’. Plus he wants us to respect whatever gift God gives someone. ‘Helping’, by which Paul means ‘helping others’, is a means of great blessing to fellow-members in various kind of trouble which all of

us face at one time or another. The gifts of companionship to the lonely and of pre-cooked casseroles for a family in need are just a couple of practical examples of ‘helping [others]’.

‘Government’, or ‘administration’, is also listed as a ministry. This is a ‘gift’ that only some have. It is, however, critical for the effective operation of a local church, a denomination or organization. Such a ministry must not be looked down upon by more ‘spiritual’ believers.

Finally Paul comes to ‘various kinds of tongues’. It is well to be reminded that Paul’s sermon in chapters 12–14 was necessitated by the Corinthian preoccupation with ‘tongues-speaking’ as the clearest or even the only evidence of the presence of the Spirit. Pointedly, however, this ‘gift’ is but one of many ‘gifts’ and it is the last one in the list. In passing, Paul’s pastoral method must be noted. The inference just made by me is there to be drawn and is probably correct. But Paul leaves the readers to draw that conclusion themselves. He does not rub their faces in it.

A series of rhetorical questions brings this section to an end. Having stated that ‘God appointed some to be a, b, c, etc.’ (verse 28), he now asks, ‘Are all a, b, c, etc.?’ The point is all the sharper when we note that Paul preceded each question with the small Greek word ‘mē,’ which grammatically demands an answer, ‘No’, to each question.

So Paul proceeds down his list given in verse 28, omitting reference to ‘helpers’ and ‘governments.’ He concludes his list: Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? The answer is always, ‘No!’ Thus Paul reaffirms the diversity of ‘gifts’ in the ‘members’ of the one ‘body’. ‘Tongues-speaking’ is, indeed, one such gift. But it is only one, and it comes at the bottom of the list.

#### THE GREATER GIFTS AND A MORE EXCELLENT WAY (12:31a)

This is one of those ‘bridge’ passages used by Paul to take the reader from one part of his reasoning to the next. The first part of the verse (‘But earnestly desire the higher gifts’) looks back to what he has just been saying. Zeal for ‘tongues-speaking’ was evidently a mark of some of the members of this congregation since later he observes that they are ‘zealous for spirits’ (pneumatikōn—14:12; cf. 14:1).

The second part of the verse points on immediately to his words about ‘love’, the subject of the next passage. Paul promises he will show a still more excellent way which we use to begin our study tomorrow. In chapter 14 Paul will sing the praises of ‘prophecy’ while systematically showing up the deficiencies of ‘tongues-speaking’.

Next: 1 Cor. 12:31b–13:13.