

PREFACE

In our examination of vv12-14 last week, we saw Paul emphasizing the important *unity* of the body of Christ. In v12 he states that “the body is one,” with “many members.” He then presses the point in v13: It was the “one Spirit” who “baptized” us “into one body,” and those *in* the body are “all made to drink of one Spirit.” Here is the *unity* portion of the two-fold argument: the church is one, made one and sustained as one by the one Holy Spirit.

Now, in the next and longer passage Paul offers the *diversity* portion of the argument, and he does so using rather fantastical imagery to make his point. As we delve into this passage we should keep in mind that Paul’s application to the Corinthian’s situation is not about *persons* within the church, but hearkens back to what he wrote in vv7-11 about the Holy Spirit distributing *manifestations of Himself*, according to His will, in the church. That is, this is less about people in the church than it is about the Spirit-gifts manifested in them.

Have someone read 1 Corinthians 12:14-17.

vv15-16

If the foot says, “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 says, “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.

The apostle begins by posing an absurdity: talking body parts, at least two of which claim they should not be part of the body because they are not *other* body parts.

I want to point out just one aspect of this analogy: Note that there is no hint of superior/inferior positioning here. We have two limbs and two sensory organs, one each of which may be envious of the other, but does not necessarily feel inferior to it. So, for example, I may be envious of someone who is an artist, because I would like to be able to draw and paint a picture, but that does not mean I consider the gift of writing inferior to that.

v17

If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be?

If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

Paul answers the absurdity of the previous analogy with another absurdity—which, though Paul doesn’t know it, ties back to my absurd illustration from last week: If the whole church body was Rupert Gandwillers, how well would repairs to the church house be carried out?

The point being that *all* the parts—*all* the members of the body—are necessary for the proper functioning of the body.

Have someone read 1 Corinthians 12:18-20.

v18

But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.

After his fantastical analogies in vv15-17, Paul now snaps us back to reality by echoing the thought in v11:

But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.

Note the unity of the Godhead here standing as an example for the unity of the church body. In v11 it is the Holy Spirit “distributing to each one individually just as He wills.” Here in v18 it is God (*theos*) who “has placed the members...just as He desired.” I imagine this is much like the work of the Godhead in creation itself: In Genesis 1:1 “God” (*elohim* (plural); that is, the Godhead) created the heavens and the earth. But in Colossians it is Christ (“His beloved Son”) who created all things.

Have someone read Colossians 1:13-17.

We can draw from Scripture that from at least a human perspective the individual members of the Godhead have distinct responsibilities, different areas of work—we might even say, different “gifts.” Yet all three work together in sublime unity, working as a whole for the good of all. In fact, considering all that each member of the Godhead does, one would be hard pressed to determine which of its members is the more important.

This being true, there is a glaring, gross presumption in any individual, faction within the local church, an entire local body or even an entire sect or denomination thinking that *their* gift of choice should be prominent—or worse, everyone in the church should have this gift—even to *aspire* to obtaining this gift. This attitude effectively replaces Christ as the head of the church, and the Godhead as creator of the kingdom, with narcissistic human beings honoring themselves instead of their Lord. And in v19 Paul points out how ridiculous the result would be.

v19

If they were all one member, where would the body be?

Consider, if you will, the institution of marriage. I suppose exceptions are possible, but I have never met a married couple in which each spouse contributed identical gifts to the union.

We all can probably agree that a union of man and woman, male and female becoming one flesh ([Genesis 2:24](#)), *requires* just that—male and female: physical opposites. I would dare to posit that it also requires that they cannot be of same abilities, personality, temperament, sensibilities, and gifts to form that perfect union of “one.”

The successful, workable marriage requires differences that *complement* each other in the true sense of that word: something added to complete a whole. Imagine a marriage in which both spouses were alike in every way: alike in nature, personality, sensibilities, and even skills and gifts. They would constantly be butting heads, fighting each other, because they would also share the same failings and frailties. But when two people in a marriage complement each other the one fills in many of the voids in the other. Where one is deficient, the other may be prolific; where one is weak, the other may be strong; where one, in one area, may be hard and unyielding, the other may bring a yielding softness that balances out the two.

In my own marriage there are certain abilities (gifts) in which I am weak, but my wife is strong. There are others in which that is reversed. There are other situations in which both of us bring only a set of *moderate* abilities; neither is strong or weak, but when we pool what we have—two halves—we are effective. I have some gifts, my wife has others, and combining the two sets into a whole makes us a pretty good team—a “one flesh.”

Just so in the church. If every member of the church had identical gifts, nothing would ever get done. It simply wouldn't work. But by individual believers, each imbued with the Spirit, complementing each other, filling in the voids that exist in every person's toolkit, the church becomes an effective ministering, teaching, supportive, edifying whole.

v20

But now there are many members, but one body.

Here I really like the NIV and ESV: “As it is, there are many parts, but one body.” In other words, all this is really academic, since it is impossible to have 150, 200 members of a church all with identical Spirit-gifts. The Holy Spirit has designed it otherwise. Verse 20 marks the end point of the *inclusio*, restating what began in v14: “For the body is not one member, but many.”

Paul has been arguing, and will continue to argue against the position of some in the Corinth church—to wit, “To be truly ‘spiritual,’ we *all* should have the gift of speaking in tongues.” The Holy Spirit is in charge of apportioning these gifts, and that is not what He has in mind.