

PREFACE

There is a book in our library, written by a former uniformed officer of the presidential Secret Service during the Clinton administration. In this book, titled *Crisis of Character*, Gary Byrne, who was typically posted right outside the Oval Office, recounts the noxious behavior of the President and First Lady during those years.

The Clintons were surrounded by individuals whose sworn duty it was to protect the First Family at any cost, to immediately put themselves, at risk of their own lives, between the Clintons and any harm that might arise. In return, the Clintons treated these individuals with utter contempt. Mrs. Clinton was particularly venomous in her profane vitriol, screaming at and cursing those sworn to protect her. She demanded to be treated as if a sovereign queen:

When her detail passed Mrs. Clinton expected everyone else to disappear. She didn't want to see anyone in the White House halls, as if the whole place were her *personal* Executive Mansion. It was insulting. People scurried as if in a giant game of hide-and-seek. An agent traveling ahead of her would direct people to disappear, usually into a nearby closet or alcove.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:20-26.

In the body of Christ there are many different parts, many different members—many different Spirit-gifts. And it is part of our human nature to think that some are more important, more worthy of honor, while others are less important, less worthy of honor. Certainly the one whom the Spirit has equipped for the pulpit is more important than the one He has equipped to clean the toilets, or even teach Sunday School. Yet that is an earthly perspective, not a heavenly one.

v20

Let me add just one more thought about v20: Paul is indeed emphasizing the diversity of the many parts, or members (gifts), but here is a reminder that the “diversity is not an end in itself,” but is meant to “function within” the essential unity of the body (Fee). The Spirit’s many gifts are designed to work *together*, as a body, with each other.

v21

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.”

Paul’s fantastical analogy of talking body parts continues for a moment with a “top-down” assumption that the components of the head (eye, head) consider themselves more important than the more mechanical extremities (hand, feet).

On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary;

Consider (albeit mixing the metaphors):

- It may be your eyes that take in the beautiful, awe-inspiring mountain grandeur; without the eyes you could only imagine the scene. It was your *feet*, however, that got you to the spot from which you could see the landscape before you.
- It may be true that the head is the seat of control of the body, but if some object or another's person's fists come hurtling toward it, what instinctively happens? What is the body's reflexive action? The *hands* come up to protect the head from the blow.

As I have just mixed the objects in Paul's metaphor, he too is switching the application of his metaphors. I have been saying that Paul's reference in Chapter Twelve is not to people but to their Spirit-gifts. So far that has been true. But now, in vv21-27, he is indeed speaking of people instead of gifts. Now he presents the various parts of the human body as analogous to certain *individuals* in the body of Christ—the church. Of course, there is no sharp line of delineation between the person and his or her Spirit-gifts; in the mature believer who is part of a mature church, the two almost become one.

The thrust of this passage cannot help but take us back to Chapter Eleven, and the bad behavior of the elite in the church at the Lord's Supper and the church's so-called "love feasts."

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-22.

Here in Chapter Twelve Paul is analogizing the same two groups of people, contrasting the wealthy elite, the prominent in the church, the leaders, with those they considered their social lessers, the *hoi polloi*, the commoners in their midst. As to the metaphor, "the members of the body which seem to be weaker," most seem to agree that Paul refers to the internal organs of the human body. They are "weaker," more fragile, prone to ailments and sickness, belly aches, indigestion, etc. Yet the body could not survive without them. Even the least considered of the internal organs serve essential service for the sustaining of life.

and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, whereas our more presentable members have no need of it.

One reason this verse seems to be rather awkwardly written, and why our various translations substitute a plethora of synonyms, is that Paul refers obliquely to body

parts that throughout history—and especially in the first century—were and have been deemed *unmentionable*. The cross-references from the *Treasury of Scripture Knowledge* give the game away with it's cross-reference to Genesis 3:7.

Read Genesis 3:7.

The NKJV, NIVs, and ESV help us out.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:22-23. (not NASB)

The idea here with this metaphor, is that there are portions of the human body that *seem* less honorable, because in most cultures they are kept hidden away, covered up, not displayed. We may think this renders them *less* honorable, but in point of fact, Paul is saying, the careful modesty with which we treat them renders them *more* honorable.

We can tie this back to our discussions in Chapter Seven regarding marriage. These body parts we typically make a point of keeping covered (“less presentable”) are special because they are reserved for our spouse—indeed, we no longer have authority over them; that authority has been handed over to our spouse (v7:4). They are special, private, reserved for the honor we render to our husband or wife. And, of course, we can add to this the utter necessity of these “less presentable members” for human reproduction. Quite contrary to the original assumption, we “bestow more abundant honor” on these members, which is why they are kept private. Just as with our “weaker” internal organs, without these less presentable members we could not live; they are critical to our survival.

Thus it is in the body of Christ. There are certain members of the church who are never on the platform, never teach a class, never raise their hand for a question or comment. Some of us may not even know their names, or that they exist at all. Yet they may do something for the body, utilizing their Spirit-gifts, behind the scenes and out of the public eye. Or it may not even be a specific act of service, but just *who they are* as a person, as a believer, contributes something valuable, essential to the body. Perhaps just being who they are performs an invaluable service to the church.

v24b

But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked,

Don't miss how this sentence begins; don't skip lightly over its first two words: “But God...” This has been a recurring marker in this chapter.

- In vv4-6 Paul speaks of the varieties of gifts, of ministries, of effects—but declares that the Spirit, the Lord Jesus, and Father God are at work in them all.

- After listing the gifts in vv8-10 he declares in v11, “But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.”
- In v18 Paul states that God, just as His Spirit, is in charge of the distribution of gifts in the church: “But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.”
- Here in this verse he explains that God Himself has “composed” the church—*synkerannymi*, commingled, mixed together, blend (KJV: “tempered together”)—the body according to His wisdom and will, distributing the honor due the members of the church.
- And finally in the last paragraph Paul lists another subset of gifts, but prefaces it with the fact that it is *God* who has appointed these gifts in the church.

It is to this that we cling. It really isn’t very clear what Paul means by pointing out that God has designed the mix of people and gifts in the body of Christ so that “more abundant honor” is given to those who are either weak, or in need of such honor. From the proceeding verse we can learn the *reason* for this, but it is not clear just what he means: Precisely how is this honor apportioned? What does that look like in the local church?

That, however, is a minor consideration next to the reminder throughout this chapter that God, working through all three members of the Godhead, is the one doing it. It is He who is responsible for the gifts, their distribution, and the distribution of individuals throughout the kingdom. This casts fresh light on a verse familiar to us all.

Read Romans 8:28.

It is the Lord God who brings balance and stability to the church. It loses that balance when man intervenes with his arrogance and pride, his earth-bound reasoning, thinking one gift—hence one person—is better, and due more honor, than another.

I would like to close with a meditation on this topic by Martin Luther.

Luther: The sun does not say that it is black. The tree does not say, “I bear no apples, pears, or grapes.” That is not humility, but if you have gifts you should say, “These gifts are from God; I did not confer them upon myself. One should not be puffed up on their account. If someone else does not have the gifts I have, then he has others. If I exalt my gifts and despise another’s, that is pride.” The sun does not vaunt himself, though more fair than the earth and the trees, but says, “Although tree, you do not shine, I will not despise you, for you are green and I will help you to be green.”