

PREFACE

Almost sixteen years ago individuals from all corners gathered at the old Miller Junior High in Marshalltown, Iowa. We came from all walks of life, of ages spanning twenty years. The reason for this gathering was focused on just one old man.

He was almost completely bald. Extra folds of skin billowed below his chin. His belt was lost somewhere beneath a belly that had seen higher days. Age spots clustered on his hands and arms like a mottled suntan. He had become, to the unfamiliar eye, someone way past his prime, perhaps even unremarkable. But when he stepped through the doorway, the roomful of people expressed their love and respect with an outpouring of grateful applause for the elderly man.

In 1965, during my final year of junior high, our band director, Mr. Francis, had an idea. He would form a stage band with the better players from his larger concert/marching band. This was something new—certainly unheard of in Marshalltown, Iowa. Seventh, eighth and ninth-graders playing jazz? Getting up early, twice a week, to rehearse before school even started for the day? Come on. But it worked. And so for the next twenty school years, until he retired in 1986, Mr. Francis led a succession of stage bands, rehearsing in the band room at Miller Junior High.

On that day in 2005, alumni from those twenty years of junior high stage bands gathered once again in that basement band room to pay tribute to this man who had played such an unintrusive yet important role in our lives—from the 33-year-old “youngsters” who had been in his last stage band, all the way back to us old folks who had played in his first.

Part of that surprise tribute would be that some from our group would take their chairs on the stage of that dilapidated auditorium to play once again one of those old charts—under the direction of our surprised band leader. One of my former mates from the trombone section actually rented an instrument to get his chops back in shape so he could participate. And so they somehow located a stack of parchment that had been one of our regular charts back in 1965, and performed under the hand of our beloved director.

The rest of us, meanwhile, cheered them on from the sunken, spring-less auditorium seats—probably the originals from the days the school had been my mom’s high school. Though we were not up there on the stage, our hearts swelled with joy and pride, as if we were indeed up there with them. No one was jealous of those in the limelight, but rather rejoiced for and celebrated those who were.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:24b-26.

v24b-25

But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

We back up to the end of v24 because it is there that the sentence begins. Clinically speaking, Paul's use of metaphor, using the human body to illustrate his points about the church body, goes a bit awry here. And the commentators spend a little ink expressing their confusion, trying to twist the text into the original template, but there is no need.

Paul, though a consummate teacher and eloquent writer, is still human. And it is a perfectly human trait to begin a discourse with a splendidly illustrative, detailed metaphor that one eventually abandons before one is done. Using the human body as a metaphor for the church body made sense early on, but one cannot say with a straight face that one's eyes "care for" or have "concern for" one's feet, or that one's hands have any deep emotional consideration for the ears. Thus in vv25-26 Paul abandons the metaphor and goes right for the church itself.

In v25 he sets up a contrast: division (*schisma*) contrasted with "care for one another" (*merimnao*, take thought, be anxious about). We learned back in Chapter One of this letter that Paul is painfully aware of the schisms that exist in the Corinth church. He doesn't have to imagine or project; they are already there.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-11.

In that setting the apostle was referring more to doctrine, the basic principles of the faith, and whose teaching the various groups were following. But now he is applying the same rule to their *fellowship* in the body, being brothers and sisters with each other in the *family* of the church. "The opposite of division is showing care for one another" (Garland).

The best illustration of this behavior is found in 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." (11:17-22). We won't read it again, since we did in our last session. We recall the mental image of the "betters" feasting on the fine cuisine they brought for themselves—even drinking a little too much of the wine—and not sharing any with their "lessers" in the cheap seats.

Such divisions, such mindsets with their associate behavior, demonstrate the presence of a cancer in the local body of Christ. It is a very real and deadly disease in many contemporary churches—just as it was in Corinth.

The polar opposite of that diseased condition is “that the members...have the same care for one another.” That *all* members of the church body manifest a heart-felt, authentic concern for each other—implied, a concern for their betterment, their edification, their spiritual and physical health. And if we consider the two groups referred to in Corinth—and, of course, there would always be more than just two—the care and concern does not just flow down from the top, but also from the bottom up. The “hands” and “feet” in the church are not the only ones due the care and concern of others, but they are to be just as concerned for the “eyes” and “head.”

v26

And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it;

This is a common theme for Paul (and other NT writers) to the churches. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul wrote, “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.”

Read Hebrews 13:3.

And notice how what Paul writes to the Romans ties in so well with the Corinthian situation.

Read Romans 12:15-16.

To understand Paul’s mindset and purpose, we must associate it with the word *koinonia*, which is translated, “fellowship,” and more often than not, at least in our minds, we think of as “socializing.” But the biblical idea of fellowship is far deeper than just being sociable over a cup of coffee. It can certainly *include* that—chatting about the weather and one’s recent golf score—but the body of Christ is to embrace a far deeper and richer level of association. True *koinonia* is suffering with those who suffer. Just as having a toothache can make us feel miserable from head to toe, or having minor surgery on one small part of an extremity can put us to bed for a day or two, when there is pain and suffering in one member or portion of the church, there is to be suffering experienced and shared in its other members.

This is not something we set out to do; this is something that occurs naturally when we think rightly of our brothers and sisters in Christ—something which was so lacking in some members of the Corinth church.

...if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

Spurgeon: I am afraid that this second half of the verse refers to a duty which is more neglected than is the other. It is an easier thing to suffer with those that suffer than it is to rejoice with those that rejoice; and I will tell you why it is so; because, in giving compassion to those that suffer, you have some sense of dignity. (continued)

Condescension is often a sort of pride; but when a brother is better off than you are,—when he has more talent than you have,—when he is more successful than you are,—for you to go and rejoice with him, and be as glad as if it were all your own gladness,—ay, to enter into his joy, and say, “God be thanked, my brother, for thy prosperity! I would increase it if I could, for I feel that I am a partner with you;”—ah! this needs great grace. So, may God give us more grace continually, and deliver us from everything like envy, which is of Satan, and yet is all too common even among professing Christians.

Thinking back again to that special moment in 2005, sitting slumped in those ancient swayback auditorium seats, I can only speak for myself. Based, however, on expressions on the faces of those around me, combined with the feelings I was experiencing, there was nothing but joy being felt and expressed for the on-stage performers. Though most of us hadn’t seen each other for decades, at least in that moment, we were still mates.

The word translated “honored” in most of our translations (*doxazo*) means “to render glorious, to glorify, magnify.” When someone in the church family is rendered glorious—I like the word used in *The Message* paraphrase: “flourishes”—we then glory in their glorification; we share in their joy and honor, we experience the same joy *they* are experiencing over their blessings. And I believe Spurgeon to be right: this is the harder of the two, for it is in our nature to be jealous, envious of those receiving any glory of which we are deprived. The apostle Peter sums this up for us.

Read 1 Peter 3:8-9.

I want to close by illustrating this precept within the context of our “prayer and praise” time. We usually fail to plumb the true depths of this God-ordained practice. There is nothing wrong about praying for a good result to an upcoming surgery, or praying that someone who is ill will have their health restored, or praying for the emotional and spiritual well-being of someone in deep sorrow. But that alone does not fulfill the injunction of v26.

What we so often fail to do is to “enter into” either their sorrow or joy. Just how this will be accomplished will surely be different for each person, but nonetheless we are called to do this. (And this is for family members; our prayers for anyone outside the fellowship, those without Christ, must be for their salvation.) Paul calls us to not just pray for them in their suffering, *but to enter into* their suffering; he calls us to not just acknowledge their blessings and praise, *but to enter into* those joys, to *enter into* their praise: *to become one with them in their pain or glory.*

I commend this to your own, private prayer time. *Lord, teach me how to do this; show me how to be in true koinonia with my brothers and sisters.*