

## Members of One Another In the Body of Christ

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The church at Corinth was having issues! Don't all churches? Someone cracked: "Never join a perfect church because it won't be perfect anymore!" Carlyle Marney once said that in his search for the perfect church he missed the real one right in front of him.

### I

What were the issues? It was about valuing all members and all spiritual gifts. Some people and some groups in the church felt that they and their gifts were not valued. Others felt that the church really didn't need some of the people and their gifts. If they left it would be just fine with them. Some people felt that their spiritual gifts were superior to other's gifts. We don't know all the issues, but we can sense the problem.

Paul addresses these spiritual problems theologically

- 1) There are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit.
- 2) There are varieties of acts of service, but the same Lord.

3) And there are varieties of ways of participating in the energies, or power, of God, but the same God, activating them all in everyone.

4) Each and every member is given a manifestation of the Spirit which are to be used for the sake of the *common good*.

So, you can't say some gifts are better than others because the same God, Christ and Spirit are behind them all. And they are given for the building up of the Body of Christ, not for the glorification of the individual.

That's a good place to start, don't you think?

## II

Paul lists a number of the gifts, wisdom, knowledge, prophesying, healings, speaking in tongues, etc., but as with his other lists of gifts these are not exhaustive. The Spirit has a *plentitude* of gifts.

Then he launches into a vivid way of illustrating how gifts can become a problem in our, oh so human church.

~The body, he says, has many members, and all are valuable.

~If the foot should say, "Because I am not the hand, I do not belong to the body", it is no less a part of the body. If the ear should say, "because I am not the eye, I do not belong to the body", that does not make it any less a part of the body.

We can sense here that some of the church felt they and their gifts were not important.

Paul goes on:

~If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the smelling be?" In my slightly cracked imagination, I saw a giant eye-ball bouncing down the street.

Healthy churches use all the body parts. We are not all "praise and worship", not all "teaching and learning", not all "service and activism".

Then Paul says:

~The eye cannot say to the hand: "I have no need of you". Or the hand to the foot", "I have no need of you". I thought in my cracked imagination: If the teeth said to the gums "I have no need of you", how long would the teeth survive?

No part of the church can afford to say to any other part of the church or person in the church, "I have no need of you". We can all say that in a number of ways. We all need each other more than we ever know.

On the contrary, Paul urges the church to take special care of those persons or parts which for some reasons are deemed "*less than*".

There are some deemed "weaker", but Paul says, they are *indispensable*.

There were some parts thought to be less “honorable”, but we are to invest them with greater honor. Once the comedian George Brooks followed a performance by the great singer Robert Goulet. He said as he came on stage: “Have you ever felt like the world was a tuxedo and you were a pair of old brown shoes?” Ever felt like a pair of old brown shoes? I think the church today is learning how to honor more bodies, or parts of the body: gay bodies, brown and black bodies, older bodies, non-typical bodies, bodies with minds neurologically different. Yes, let’s show them even greater honor!

~Paul says, God gives greater honor to the part thought to be inferior. And why? *So there may be no division or schism in the body*; and so the members will have the *same care* for all.

~Then the final word: “If one member suffers, all suffer together; and if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”

### III

I remember fondly those first days with you as I grew to know and love you. I loved your amazing spiritual diversity. I got to know you first in your announcements and the celebrations and concerns before the prayer. I loved how one week Doug would announce the Fifth Street dinner the next night, and another week Gay would call us to participate in a Moral Monday protest and the

NAACP meetings. How Jean brought a blanket she had knitted for a person and passed it around so we each could pray over it. How Diane led us in a prayer for those most hurting and most vulnerable in our community and nation. And how Phyllis Munson often called us to deeper prayer. How David Bradley announced some important event going on in Statesville; Nancy invited us to help with Meals on Wheels, and Katelyn organized the blood drive and asked us to give blood, and Suzie asked us to help in a public-school project.

Then in our celebrations, here we truly rejoiced in one another, and in our concerns, how we cared so deeply for the suffering in our midst, in the community and world. How I was growing to love you.

In another place in I Corinthians (14:26) Paul describes worship in Corinth. Some brought a prayer, another a song, another a word from God, another a revelation. And I thought to myself, this is how Grace worships! I saw the diversity of gifts: the singers, the prayers, the teachers, the compassion givers, the ones who worked with their hands as an act of love, those that were the “glue” that held the community together. The “helpers”. Is not “helping” a spiritual gift?

There may be some among us who feel like a minority among us, for one reason or another. Sometimes that is not comfortable. But Paul says that we *need* the minority and should take care to honor them. I believe in the Body of Christ we all of us take turns in being the minority. I think it is important to take the risk

of being a minority in someone's house. It can be character building. And it gives us sensitivity to the minority voices and minority witness in our midst. Baptists arose as a spiritual minority, and so had special care for the minority. We emphasized freedom of conscience.

Do you ever feel like an "outsider" here? You are so important to us, especially important. I think it is human nature at times to feel like an outsider.

There may be some among us searching for their spiritual gift. How can we support and encourage them in the discovery and exercise of their gifts and set these gifts free?

Some may indeed feel that their gifts are not important to the Body. Let's lift them up.

Years ago, Grace, under the inspiration of the church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., took interest in helping each other discover our gifts. And we developed a process of "sounding a call", when a person felt a deep calling from God and wanted to find out if others in the congregation would join in that call. We may want to re-visit that for our church today.

Some are leaders in worship, other in service, others in prayer, others in activism, others in community building. All these are spiritual gifts. You may not feel like a leader, but not all spiritual gifts are leadership gifts. Some, as I said

before, have the spiritual gift of “helping”. Without the worker bees, where would the *honey* be?

#### IV

In our call to worship today, we read Paul’s words in Romans that we are “members of one another.” I love that phrase. Our lives are bound together in the Body of Christ. When one suffers, we all suffer, when one is wounded we all are wounded, when one rejoices we all rejoice, when one is honored we all beam in joy, when one is in distress, we come to their aid.

What a gift this is. If you’ve ever talked to someone who by some circumstance in life has been deprived of their spiritual community, and heard how they miss it, you realize how easy it is to take it for granted.

I think we especially feel the gift of it at communion where we share the bread and wine of Christ, then circle and hold hands and sing.

#### V

All of chapter 12 in I Corinthians is about spiritual gifts, and every verse is leading us to chapter 13 where Paul urges us to seek the *one indispensable gift*. The gift without which all the other gifts, no matter how great, are *nothing*. This gift is, of course, *love*, and all the other gifts are but expressions of the one greatest gift of all, love.

I have preached sermons that may have been thoughtful and well put together but lacked love. They turned to ashes in my mouth. There have been some Sundays when after a sermon, I've felt like doing one thing: getting in bed and pulling the covers over my head and staying there until Monday when I could get and start working on the *next* sermon to try to redeem the *last* one. We have all had the experience of doing good things for God and others but have done so out of grudging duty, not love and felt the falseness of it. It's all about love.

I have been long intrigued by Paul's words in Galatians 6:10 where he writes:

So then...let us do good to all people, and *especially* to those in the household of faith.

*Especially*. Aren't we supposed to love everyone equally? But here Paul says to take special care of those who are in the household of faith. Maybe a good title of today's sermon might have been *Love Especially*.

Behold one another in this Body of Christ, behold them, cherish them, honor them, for we are members of one another.