

In the passage preceding this chapter, Paul had rebuked the Corinthian church for the way the freemen took advantage of the communion meal and left scraps for the poor. Class distinction has no place in the church. In our passage today Paul is explaining how every member of the church is important and needed. To think otherwise is to disable the church in some important areas.

*<sup>12</sup> For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.* 1 Corinthians 12:12 The human body is used in this passage as an illustration of the church, referred to as the body of Christ. Paul knew the analogy well, as it was a part of his conversion. Blinded by the glory of Christ he heard the Savior ask, “*Why are you persecuting me?*” Paul asked who this glorious one is. He responded, “*I am Jesus whom you are persecuting*” (Acts 9:4-5<sup>i</sup>)! That implied that to persecute Christians is to persecute Jesus’ body in the world. Jesus also said that what we do *to the least of these my brothers, you did it to me* (Matthew 25:40<sup>ii</sup>). Paul did not come up with the body analogy on his own. It came from Jesus. When Paul wrote in this verse, “*so it is with Christ,*” he means with the body of Christ in the world today. Those who have placed their faith and hope in Jesus have many members just as the human body does. (also see verse 27.<sup>iii</sup>)

*<sup>13</sup> 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.* 1 Corinthians 12:13 What makes us all one is the fact that our baptism declared that we have died to our old nature and been raised to newness of life in Christ (Romans 6:3,4<sup>iv</sup>). Our primary identity is no longer our culture, Jew or Greek, or our status in society, slaves or free. It is that we all were immersed in the Holy Spirit who indwells us. God delights in bringing diversity into harmony. The Corinthian church had diversity but lacked harmony. How are we doing?

The world recognizes the beauty in interdependence and harmony, but on a personal level, the nature of man is to be independent. We talk about community as if it were a wonderful thing and fantasize about what it would be like if we all served one another. But when it comes to our own part, we prefer to be autonomous. God designed the church to experience *complementary interdependence* as a testimony to the world. The Holy Spirit in each of us makes that possible.

*<sup>14</sup> For the body does not consist of one member but of many.* 1 Corinthians 12:14 Every part/member has a function that serves the good of the whole body. It isn't a democracy. Two-thirds of your body never wins over the other one-third. If it did we would die. You need it all in harmony or you will be disabled. In many differing scenarios, losing the function of one small part of the body will result in death! We need the diverse parts to be in harmony.

*The basis for our unity within Christ’s Body begins not with our similarity but with our diversity. It seems safe to assume that God enjoys variety, and not just at the cellular level. He didn’t stop with a thousand insect species; he conjured up several hundred thousand species of beetles and weevils alone. In his famous speech in the Book of Job, God pointed with pride to such oddities of creation as the mountain goat, the wild ass, the ostrich, and the lightning bolt. He lavished color, design, and texture on the world, giving us Pygmies and Watusis, blond Scandinavians and swarthy Italians, big-boned Russians and petite Japanese.<sup>v</sup>*

*15 If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.* 1 Corinthians 12:15-18 Paul illustrated our need for one another and the variety of gifts and callings by pointing to the human body. So many differing functions combine to make up one whole being that is interdependent on all its unique parts and their abilities. Without one of these parts, we are considered handicapped. Thus, the church needs a great variety of callings, without which it is hindered in some way.

Notice that it is God who arranges the members in the body as He chooses. God decides what each person's gift is and where it will be used. One problem in the American church is that we look for a church that meets our need, rather than seeing where we can be fed as well as being of service. If people would ask God where He wants them, there would be a whole shake up in the churches of today. And this is why churches are not as effective in their communities as they could be. **We too often choose what we like rather than where God wants to place us to serve.**

It is amazing how our entire body responds to pain or an attack or pleasure. All the members naturally share the experience and do their part to respond uniquely but in unity. The diversity is essential. We can't ignore a body part or do without it and still be whole. Sometimes because of a defect or accident or war a member of one's body is missing. We make prosthetics to replace it for cosmetic reasons but also for functionality. We must value every member and see their importance. To isolate one member is to our own detriment, unless, as we'll see later in this letter, that member is diseased. There are those rare cases in which the diseased member is endangering all the other members, such as is the case with cancer. Cancer is the result of a cell's shut down mechanism failing. It begins reproducing without the ability of normal cells to limit their reproduction as needed by the rest of the body.

*19 If all were a single member, where would the body be?* 1 Corinthians 12:19 Recently I watched interviews with D-Day veterans. A couple of them commented that one of the most traumatizing memories was the many individual body parts lying in the sand and floating in the ocean. And yet we don't seem to be too concerned about the many members of the body of Christ who have chosen isolation. They cannot fully function on their own and they are handicapping a local church body by not fulfilling their God assigned roles. God can replace them with someone else, but do we realize what we are doing when we decide nothing is good enough for our presence? We do more harm to ourselves than we do to the body when we limit our service to God. However, we will be held accountable for both (Romans 14:12<sup>vi</sup>). A body part by itself may live for a while on ice, but it will soon die. If we all decided to be independent there would be no real representation of Christ in the earth.

A lone ranger Christian is not a hero. Sheep stay in flocks for safety and to help one another know which way to go. They can survive on their own on an island where there are no predators or noxious weeds, - but this world has a predator and is full of poisonous weeds that look delicious (1 Peter 5:8<sup>vii</sup>; Hebrews 12:15<sup>viii</sup>).

<sup>20</sup> *As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.* 1 Corinthians 12:20 *God requires only one thing of “cells”: that each person be loyal to the Head. If each cell accepts the needs of the whole Body as the purpose of its life, then the Body will live in health. It is a brilliant stroke, the only pure egalitarianism I observe in all of society. God has endowed every person in the Body with the same capacity to respond. In Christ’s Body a teacher of three-year-olds has the same value as a bishop, and that teacher’s work may be just as significant. A widow’s dollar can equal a millionaire’s annuity. Shyness, beauty, eloquence, race, sophistication—none of these matter, only loyalty to the Head, and through the Head to each other.*<sup>ix</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.”* 1 Corinthians 12:21 The church often emphasizes the more notable gifts, but each gift is dependent on all the others. What if there is no janitor? What if there is no one who comes alongside the hurting guest? What if there is no administrator or treasurer? One missing cog can cause a gear to fail.

*Many people hop around to different communities looking for the right fit. If we are members of a local church, we are indispensable. And all of the other members are indispensable parts of our lives. They, too, are part of the body that God has put together to display the beauty of the gospel.*<sup>x</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,* <sup>23</sup> *and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty,* <sup>24</sup> *which our more presentable parts do not require.* 1 Corinthians 12:22-24a This may be referring to the body's internal organs. They are hidden away and rarely thought of but are indispensable. So it is with some members of the body of Christ. You never see the janitor clean, but without her service you would not want to meet here. No one sees the menu selection planning for Wednesday evening, but the young adults sure enjoy it, and so do the guests who sometimes stay because of the hospitality.

Every part has its role, and each is essential. We must treat the differences with respect and not expect each to do more than he or she is designed to do. Some members of the church do not want to speak publicly but love to work behind the scenes. Others have gifts that require them to be vocal and in front of others. Some are gifted with assisting those people. Others have the mental gifts and personalities to teach, while others want to serve in a physical way. And some are gifted at spotting the needs of others and assisting them. Each is as important as the others.

<sup>24b</sup> *But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it,* 1 Corinthians 12:24b *Rather than being a sign of weakness, interdependence is God’s design for the church. The church is to be a microcosmic picture of a restored humanity and is to reflect God’s original intention for humanity (i.e., interdependence). Rather than embracing the hierarchy and celebrity culture in the world surrounding the church, it is called to be a countercultural community.*<sup>xi</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.* <sup>26</sup> *If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.* 1 Corinthians 12:25,26 And so we recognize the need to honor one another and value each one's role in the body. If the foot is injured, the whole body suffers. If we have a toothache, our whole body is not going to function well, and yet how often do we think of the importance of each tooth? Being one body with many

members means we suffer with those who suffer and rejoice if one member is honored. **It is not a competition but a collaboration.**

This is community as God intended it. In the 1960s there were many communes that started up looking to establish a different kind of society. They all eventually failed because the nature of man is to be independent, and each person has their own ideas about what is right or wrong. The desire for community is from God, but it can only work when we give up our independence and rely on the same One, while each member is sacrificing for one another as Jesus sacrificed Himself for us (Ephesians 5:25-27<sup>xii</sup>). There is a cost to have true community.

I experienced community in a cult, but that was because we were all devoted to the leader and his teaching. We separated ourselves from the culture and thought by doing this we were dedicating our lives to God. It was a counterfeit of true community with Christ as the head. Even so, many who left the group missed that oneness. Of course, even in the body of Christ, some members will be present to serve their own interests. There are tares in the wheat field (Matthew 13:38,39<sup>xiii</sup>). But we are to be patient and loving but honest in the hope that the kindness of God will lead them to repentance (Romans 2:4<sup>xiv</sup>).

*<sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.* 1 Corinthians 12:27 This is profound. Do we think of ourselves in this way, that each of us is a vital part of the rest of us? Do we see the importance of us using our gifts for the whole while receiving the expression of other's gifts? Or do we think we are independent?

While writing notes for this passage years ago, I was facing a situation where a type A personality thought they knew what was best for the congregation and told the elders that they should lead in a physical issue. They said voting on it is unbiblical. Well, is the congregation the body or not? Do they also have the Spirit or not? Yes, elders are to lead spiritually, but not even that is to be done with a heavy hand. (Matthew 20:25<sup>xv</sup>; 2 Corinthians 1:24<sup>xvi</sup>; 1 Peter 5:3<sup>xvii</sup>) (They went out from us, but they were not of us. 1 John 2:19a<sup>xviii</sup>)

If I love Jesus, I must love His body. People say they love Jesus but not His church. That is not possible. You may not like a way a church is organized, or a church's leadership might be ungodly, but we all are to love the body of Jesus in the world today.

*<sup>28</sup> And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.* 1 Corinthians 12:28 *Apostles* - the twelve, official representatives chosen by Jesus as witnesses of the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord. Paul said he was like one born late as Jesus appeared to him and chose him as an apostle to the Gentiles after the ascension, but he did see the resurrected Lord (1 Corinthians 15:8<sup>xix</sup>). A few others have the title who were not witnesses (see Barnabas in Acts 14:14<sup>xx</sup>), but in that case, we must consider that as a generic term meaning official representatives as they don't fit the criteria of Acts 1:21,22<sup>xxi</sup>, to have been with Christ and seen the risen Lord.

*Prophets* - See 1 Corinthians 14:3<sup>xxii</sup> in which their ministry is described as upbuilding, encouragement, and consolation. They may predict a future event like Agabus did (Acts 11:28<sup>xxiii</sup>), but that is not their primary role. *Pro - femi* to speak forth a divine message. This can be a sermon that is inspired or a word to an individual that is timely from the Holy Spirit. Next are *teachers*, those who are knowledgeable to teach the Scriptures. These are listed as the first through third as necessary for building up the body

(Ephesians 4:11-13<sup>xxiv</sup>), but that does not establish a hierarchy or mean that they can do without all the other gifts.

Other gifts include *miracles* - miraculous acts at the leading of the Holy Spirit; *healing* - to pray for another's healing through divine intervention; helping, which is the most needed of gifts and therefore the most common; *administration* - large gatherings need someone other than the speaking elder to help organize. This would often be the head deacon; *tongues* - a gift of languages, supernatural ability to speak another language, or a prayer language from your spirit to God, or as at Pentecost a proclamation of the gospel in the listeners language (Acts 2:6<sup>xxv</sup>).

*<sup>29</sup> Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? <sup>30</sup> Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? <sup>31</sup> But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.* 1 Corinthians 12:29-31 God gives the gifts as He wills, but we should desire the higher gifts, those that are most useful in building up the body. Yet, if we are not given them, we should not try to pretend we have them. No one is dispensable. Our interdependence means we need each one and each one adds to the whole. That is why we need the love of Jesus to overlook faults and failures knowing we too are not yet perfected. Part of the body putting up with weaker members is learning patience and unconditional love. We don't amputate because we think we would be better off without them unless they are not part of the body but attempting to exert an ungodly influence (1 Corinthians 5:11<sup>xxvi</sup>).

There is something even more excellent than these gifts - a *more excellent way*, or "incomparable way." Lightfoot That is the next chapter. If the gifts are not exercised in love, putting others first, building them up, seeking the mutual good of all, something is wrong (Romans 14:19<sup>xxvii</sup>). **The first fruit of the Spirit is love, so the gifts of the Spirit should be exercised in the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22<sup>xxviii</sup>).** If they are not, it indicates an imitation of the gifts by the carnal nature of someone caught in pride.

Paul's point is that there are to be no divisions or hierarchy. We are all one. As one body we are to present to the world a picture of unity out of diversity with all parts working together for the good of all in love. That is so unique and unlike the world that it will draw others to consider that God is at work in our midst.

What is your gift? How do you contribute to the whole body? Finding and exercising your gift is not chore. It is a privilege and a joy.

Questions:

- 1 What is Paul's opening analogy and why is he bringing it up?
- 2 What is the major difference between the church and the world?
- 3 What makes our complementary interdependence possible?
- 4 How do we know God enjoys diversity?
- 5 How does the body illustrate the need to work harmoniously?
- 6 What is Paul's parallel to a severed body part?
- 7 What is the one thing God requires of the cells?
- 8 Why are all the parts in the Body equally important?
- 9 Is verse 27 how you think of yourself?
- 10 What is even more excellent than the gifts of the Spirit?

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<sup>i</sup> **Acts 9:4-5 (ESV)**

<sup>4</sup> And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" <sup>5</sup> And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

<sup>ii</sup> **Matthew 25:40 (ESV)**

<sup>40</sup> And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

<sup>iii</sup> Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

<sup>iv</sup> **Romans 6:3-4 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

<sup>4</sup> We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

<sup>v</sup> -Yancey, Philip; Brand, Paul; Zondervan. In the Likeness of God (p. 49). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

<sup>vi</sup> **Romans 14:12 (ESV)**

<sup>12</sup> So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

<sup>vii</sup> **1 Peter 5:8 (ESV)**

<sup>8</sup> Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

<sup>viii</sup> **Hebrews 12:15 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled;

<sup>ix</sup> -Yancey, Philip; Brand, Paul; Zondervan. In the Likeness of God (p. 58). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

<sup>x</sup> S. Um, Preaching the Word - 1 Corinthians: The Word of the Cross.

<sup>xi</sup> S. Um, Preaching the Word - 1 Corinthians: The Word of the Cross.

<sup>xii</sup> **Ephesians 5:25-27 (ESV)**

<sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,

<sup>26</sup> that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,

<sup>27</sup> so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

<sup>xiii</sup> **Matthew 13:38-39 (KJV)**

<sup>38</sup> The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked *one*;

<sup>39</sup> The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels.

<sup>xiv</sup> **Romans 2:4 (ESV)**

<sup>4</sup> Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

<sup>xv</sup> **Matthew 20:25 (ESV)**

<sup>25</sup> But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.

<sup>xvi</sup> **2 Corinthians 1:24 (ESV)**

<sup>24</sup> Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith.

<sup>xvii</sup> **1 Peter 5:3 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

<sup>xviii</sup> **1 John 2:19a (ESV)**

<sup>19a</sup> They went out from us, but they were not of us;

<sup>xix</sup> **1 Corinthians 15:8 (ESV)**

<sup>8</sup> Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

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<sup>xx</sup> **Acts 14:14 (ESV)**

<sup>14</sup> But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out,

<sup>xxi</sup> **Acts 1:21-22 (ESV)**

<sup>21</sup> So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, <sup>22</sup> beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.”

<sup>xxii</sup> **1 Corinthians 14:3 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.

<sup>xxiii</sup> **Acts 11:28 (ESV)**

<sup>28</sup> And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius).

<sup>xxiv</sup> **Ephesians 4:11-13 (ESV)**

<sup>11</sup> And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, <sup>12</sup> to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, <sup>13</sup> until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,

<sup>xxv</sup> **Acts 2:6 (ESV)**

<sup>6</sup> And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language.

<sup>xxvi</sup> **1 Corinthians 5:11 (NIV)**

<sup>11</sup> But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.

<sup>xxvii</sup> **Romans 14:19 (ESV)**

<sup>19</sup> So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

<sup>xxviii</sup> **Galatians 5:22 (ESV)**

<sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,