

## **The Body of Christ**

### **1 Corinthians 12:12-31**

Several years ago I ended up going to the movies a couple times with a group of guys that were about my age. Most of them knew each other from work and I was friends with some of them and got invited to go along. We went out for supper at Famous Dave's and then I think we went to one of the newer Star Wars movies at a theatre in Oakdale, so it was a great guy's night out.

On the drive back home the conversation revolved around the movie and it quickly became apparent that I was way out of my league. They were talking about all kinds of details related to actors, directors, favorite scenes, previous episodes, background information – all kinds of details about the movie. And they talked about it pretty much the whole ride home. My head was spinning. I had nothing to contribute. How did they know all that information? How could they remember all those details? Movies were apparently more important to them than they were to me. When I watch a movie, my level of input is basically whether I liked it or not. I don't have favorite scenes, I don't pay attention to the details, I just watch the movie and either like it or don't like it.

I think we did 2 or 3 movie nights and by the end of each outing I was feeling like a total failure when it came to watching movies. "How could I be so ignorant? Is something wrong with me? I probably need to make movies a higher priority in my life..." Since movies were more important to them, I felt like they should be more important to me.

Sometimes we can feel that way about ministry in the church. I used to listen to a lot of different sermons by different preachers and I noticed that by the end of a lot of those sermons I was feeling a lot like I did in the car while driving back from the movies. I was feeling like a failure because the area of ministry they were talking about was clearly more important to them than it was to me. It could be prayer, it could be missions, it could be giving, it could be evangelism, it could be serving... A lot of times I was left with the feeling that I was a failure because I wasn't as passionate as they were. But every preacher was passionate about a different thing and it felt like I had to be passionate about every area of ministry if I was going to be a good Christian and especially a good pastor.

I've felt like that in churches as well. Some Christians get super excited about certain things in ministry and they devote all kinds of time, money, and energy to whatever it is, and sometimes they get frustrated when other Christians aren't as excited as they are about that thing. I've wondered: "Is something wrong with me if the ministries that are really important to them just aren't as important to me?"

In the church of Corinth there was one area of ministry and one spiritual gift that was more important to a lot of people than anything else, and that was speaking in tongues. Because of their cultural background in pagan idolatry, they were especially drawn to unusual behaviors, thinking that it was those kinds of things that meant you were more spiritual or more connected to God. So when some Christians in the church demonstrated the ability to speak in unknown languages, that became really important. It was the spiritual gift and area of ministry that was most sought after in the church.

The problem was that not everyone had that gift, and as you read what Paul wrote it seems like the people who didn't were probably left feeling like a failure and like their spiritual gift and area of ministry didn't matter. So people with different gifts were checking out of ministry while speaking in tongues became more and more important.

Are there certain areas of ministry that are more important than the rest? Is the area of ministry that you're most passionate about what everyone else should be passionate about? If your spiritual gift and area of ministry you care most about doesn't seem as important as others in the church, should you try to change to become like other people?

I want us to see how Paul responded to the situation in Corinth so we can get a biblical understanding of how a church family is supposed to work. Last week he wrote about how there aren't just a few gifts given by God that are spiritual or just a few people in the church with those gifts that are spiritual. Every gift is spiritual and every believer has been given spiritual gifts and has an important role in the church. This week he gives us one of the most helpful metaphors in the Bible to help us understand how a church family is supposed to work.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-13.

*<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. <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.*

So when it comes to a local church family, the way Paul says we should think about ourselves is like a human body. And the major ideas he brings up are that there is one body, but within that body there are many members. One body, many members. He says that in one Spirit the Corinthian believers were all baptized into one body – no matter where they come from – they were all united together in one body – the body of Christ – the same Spirit filling each of them.

So he's introducing the themes of unity and diversity. Oneness and variety. Many members joined together in one body. When you think of the human body, you think of all the different parts – the feet, the hands, the eyes, the ears, the nose, fingers, toes, and everything else. These are all different parts with different functions, but they don't exist or operate on their own. They're all united and connected as parts of the same body. We naturally think that certain parts and functions are more important than others, like hands and eyes, and that's the way we can think about the church as well, but Paul uses this metaphor to point out that's a faulty way of thinking.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:14-20.

*<sup>14</sup> For the body does not consist of one member but of many. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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? <sup>18</sup> But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. <sup>19</sup> If all were a single member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup> As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.*

Based on the context, what Paul likely has in mind here is that there were people in the church who felt like they were unimportant because they didn't have the gift of tongues or maybe another gift that was manifested with unusual behavior. The church was favoring those gifts and focusing so much on them, that people

who didn't have them felt like a failure – that they didn't have a place. Or that the ministry that was important to them didn't matter.

Paul likens them to a foot that sees what the hand is doing and thinks, "Because I'm not like that, I'm a failure. I'm unimportant." Or an ear that looks at the eye and thinks the same way. Paul says that kind of thinking is totally wrong. The foot and the ear are just as important as the hand and the eye. Just because the hand has an important role, doesn't mean it's most important. The hand isn't going to walk that body where it needs to go – that's where the foot comes in. And just because the eye can illuminate the world to the rest of the body doesn't elevate it above all the rest. The eye will never be able to hear what someone is saying or allow the body to enjoy music.

The foot needs to do what the foot was made to do, as does the hand, and the eye, and the ear, and the nose, and every other part in the human body. Every part is important. None of them are dispensable. God made the body like that on purpose and put all the parts together to do what he wanted them to do. That's what makes it a body. So for the Corinthians he's implying: "Don't think speaking in tongues or any other gift or area of ministry is the only important part and yours doesn't matter, or the body is going to be severely messed up."

I've been watching a lot of football lately and I've been thinking about how well this relates. Who's the most important member of the football team? Well, a lot of people think about the quarterback or the running back. Everybody wants to be the quarterback or running back. I wanted to be the running back in high school, but you know where they put me? Offensive line. The coaches could see how important every position was, and when they looked at each athlete and what they needed for the whole team to function the most effectively, they chose the best spot for each person to go. And for me, it was the offensive line. And that part was very important for the team – the only way the quarterback and running back are going to be able to do anything is if you have linemen who are doing their job. Everyone has to do their job for the team to be successful. Every part is important.

So if you're a foot, be the best foot you can be. God's gifted you to flourish as a foot. You don't need to be like the hand. If you're an ear, be the best ear you can be. If you're a linemen, be the best linemen you can be. Whatever gift and

ministry God has given you in the church, it's important. Excel in using that gift and don't feel bad or like a failure if you're not like someone else.

That's how you need to think if you feel your part doesn't matter in the church. But what about those who feel their role is super important and everyone else should try to be like them? Paul writes about that next.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:21-26.

*<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." <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. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, <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.*

So there isn't one gift or one area of ministry that is so important that the rest don't really matter or aren't needed. Paul says if you look at the human body you can see that the parts that we think are weaker or less honorable or unpresentable are actually parts that God has made indispensable, bestowed with greater honor, and treated with greater modesty. Every part is important to the body as a whole. Every part is needed. And every part is needed to do its part and not try to become like another one.

God designed the body to work like that so that there wouldn't be division, and every part would work for the good of the whole. Leon Morris says, *"In his perfect blending of the parts in the human body God provided against dissension... In the body all the members without distinction work for the good of the whole. No special care is lavished on one member to the detriment of other members."* Paul adds there is such harmony in the human body that when one part suffers, the whole body suffers and when one part rejoices, the whole body rejoices.

So, to the Corinthian church, Paul was implying that those with the gift of tongues shouldn't have the attitude that they are most important and others are unneeded. Every gift is needed for the church to function as it should. The body

won't do well without the hands or feet. The football team won't do well without the lineman, backs, and receivers, and the church won't do well without each person doing their part.

Paul finishes by applying the metaphor directly to them...

Read 1 Corinthians 12:27-31.

*<sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. <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. <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.*

The connections are clear – the church is the body of Christ, and each person has a part. There is unity, but not uniformity. God created the church to function well with great diversity and he assigned to each his or her gift and ministry. Not everyone is going to be alike and that's good. God made us different so we would need each other, depend on each other, bless each other, and do our part to strengthen the whole.

This passage was very important for the Corinthian church and what they were struggling with, and it's important for us as well. It's very important that we function well as a church and carry out the mission Christ has given us in this world. But we're not going to do that if we focus all our attention in one area of giftedness or ministry that's really important to some people. Each one of us has been gifted by God and has an important area of ministry. And if we're going to be a strong and healthy church, each of us needs to do what God has called and gifted us to do. None of us is more important than the rest and none of us is expendable.

So if you've been discouraged and feel like a failure because you're not like someone else and the things that are important to you are different than what's important to others, take heart. You probably feel that way because God made you different and he wants you to engage in a different area of ministry. Find what that is and do it. Get in the game. Pursue the ministry you're gifted in and

that's important to you. We've got all kinds of opportunities for you to get involved and when you do, you will find fulfillment and strengthen the whole church.

And if you've been frustrated because not everyone in the church feels as passionate as you about a certain area of ministry, I hope you can see why that's the case and begin to think differently. It's great for you to be excited about your area of ministry, but don't expect everyone else to be as well. Some will, and you can do ministry together, but others won't. God has given great diversity in giftedness exactly how he wanted, and the way you are gifted affects what you value most in ministry. We need to grow to appreciate the diversity God has built into the body of Christ, instead of thinking that people should be more like us.