

1“THE CHURCH, THE BODY OF CHRIST”

(I Corinthians 12:12-27)

The New Testament employs several meaningful figures of speech when it speaks of the relationship that prevails between Christ and His Church. For example, it speaks of that relationship in terms of a “building,” with Christ being the foundation and chief cornerstone and believers the “living stones” in the building. Again, it speaks (some say it only *suggests* this picture) of the church as the “Bride” of Christ. But no symbol is so familiar and so forceful as the figure of the “body.” “So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Romans 12:5). Note that the Bible does not say that the church is “like” a body. There is more intended here than an apt illustration. It is plainly indicated in the New Testament that the church is not an organization but an *organism*, not a society formed by men but a body created and indwelt by the Spirit of God and composed of living souls united by faith to a living Lord.

The Church of Jesus Christ has been brought into being and its growth has been secured by the power of the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost the followers of Christ were united into one body by the Holy Spirit. To this body, by the influence of the same Spirit, 3000 souls were added, and ever since that day all who accept Christ as Lord and Master are brought by His Spirit into membership with His body. “By one Spirit are we all baptized into one body.” As we look at the verses of our text, some of the glory of the church as the body of Christ begins to unfold.

I. THE VARIETY AND DIVERSITY WITHIN THE BODY

First, our text tells us something of the *variety and diversity within the body*. “There are diversities of gifts . . . there are differences of administrations . . . there are diversities of operations” within the body of Christ. “The body is one, and hath many members.” “The body is not one member, but many.” “Now ye are the body of Christ and members in particular.” The church is like the human body, which has eye, ear, tongue, foot, hand, heart and many other different members. The multiplicity and variety of the members make for enrichment and growth. No one organ of the body can do the work of the whole body. All of the parts are different. They are different in what they do and where they are and the honor they receive; yet all of their differences emphasize their essential oneness, because they thus *complement each other and complete the whole*.

A backward look to the long ago will show how long God has been doing business like that. Go to the backside of the desert, even into the mountain of God, Mt. Horeb. God had a job that He wanted done, so He gave Moses the gift of prayer and intimate fellowship with Himself, but to Aaron He gave the gift of speech. Together they formed the “body” of leadership for the children of Israel. One was the head, the other was the mouth. Each working in his own realm fulfilled the purpose of God and achieved His will.

Many years and thirteen chapters later in Exodus, we find another story illustrating one “body” with many members. Joshua, the young leader, was given the gift of military leadership. He was the fighter. There he was down on the plains, leading his troops in the dust and heat of battle. High on the mountainside overlooking the battlefield was Moses—now an old man, but still with the gift of prayer. There he was praying, while Moses fought. Standing behind Moses were Aaron and Hur. Perhaps they were not much when it came to prayer, but they *could* stand close and hold up the old man’s hands. All together, they won a battle that day; Joshua fighting, Moses praying, and Aaron and Hur holding up his

hands. Even so, within the church there are all varieties of service, of function, all varieties of people. “We have a God of infinite variety.” It has been sheer tragedy that the Church has gone on so often, through the centuries, as though these words were never written. Many followers of Christ have gone on trying to put God’s people into one mold, one type. Joseph Parker once complained, “The church has been a great brick maker.” It has often worked perversely to press people into the same mold and size. The church is the body of Christ, and like the human body, the members are different and perform different functions. There is great variety within the body of Christ.

II. THE UNITY OF THE BODY OF CHRIST

Then our text tells of something of the *unity of the body of Christ*. The body of Christ is unified by “the same Spirit . . . the same Lord . . . the same God” (verses 4-6). “As the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ” (verse 12). “And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it.”

The unity of the body of Christ is derived by the union between the members of the body and the Head of the body, Jesus Himself. If the church is the “body of Christ,” then the self-giving, crucified, risen Christ can never be far from the center of the church’s life. The word “body” suggests something which is vital and alive. The physiologist tells of the millions of cells in the human body. We are like those cells, many in number, diverse in function, yet united in the life which animates the body. The body lives in relation to the head. A body without a head is without life. A head without a body is without action and expression. We have tried to think of the church as just another organization. We have often divorced it from Christ. But the head cannot work without the body. The body cannot function without the head. Only as the body responds to the direction, the wooing, of the head can there be any effective action. There must be co-ordination between head and body. And just as the members in the natural body are one because they are nourished by the same blood, so the true bond of Christian unity lies in the common participation in the life of the one Lord Jesus Christ. It is important to see that the Bible never writes about a body of *Christians*; it is the body of *Christ*.

It is not only the *life* of the body, but also the *usefulness* of the body, that derives from Christ the Head of the body. In the human body much depends upon the afferent and the efferent nerves. The efferent nerves are the “out-going” nerves connecting the brain to outward appendages of the body; the afferent nerves are the “in-coming” nerves connecting the appendages with the brain. Let a pin prick touch our body and at once a message is sent to the head by the afferent nerve and immediately a response comes back to the member through the efferent nerve. In this light we can understand that when anything touches the Christian at any point of the church, Christ, the Head, is aware of it and responds immediately. The sensitivity of the Head to everything which affects His body is clear.

When there is *mutual cooperation* between the Head and the members of the body, the church is the *working* body of Christ. In Ephesians 4, provision is made for different ministries within the working body of Christ, but no provision is made for non-working members. Christ dwelt within the body and life of Jesus of Nazareth. His desire now is to live within the life of the members of His body. The body of Jesus of Nazareth once did the work and will of Christ. Now His disciples are His body and must do His work and will. And the purpose of this “re-incarnation” of Jesus in His body today is *that Christ Himself may be seen* just as He was seen in His body 2000 year ago. A good stained-glass window is made up of thousands of tiny pieces of colored glass held together by some cementing agent. Each Christian is like a piece of colored glass in a total picture depicting Christ. The church, the communion of saints, is the body of Christ. The cementing agent holding the saints together is the Holy

Spirit. Created by union with the Head and the penetrating energy of His Spirit, there is unity within the body of Christ.

There is one implication of this unity which needs to be recognized and explored in practice in every local body of Christ. If we are members of the same body, then we are members of one another. Several nights ago, I got up in the middle of the night to get a drink of water. As I walked into the dark kitchen, I ran into a carton of cokes that had been used as a doorstop during the day. The timing was perfect. I struck the carton hard on the little toe of my left foot. Immediately my whole body reacted! My lips cried out, my eyes swam with tears, my hands grabbed and massaged the injured spot, and the other foot suddenly took on the weight of the whole body—in fact, the whole body suffered! The same is true (or should be) when a member of the body of Christ is damaged, offended, or is out of fellowship with the other members! “If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.” When the body is healthy, there is marvelous unity within it.

III. THE DIGNITY AND RESPONSIBILITY OF EACH MEMBER OF THE BODY

Finally, our text tells us some important things about the *dignity and responsibility of each individual member in the body*. In verses 15 through 24, the Apostle Paul explores some of the members of the body to show that each member has its own distinctive dignity and its own individual responsibility. “Members in particular” indicates that the place and the function of each is ordained of God. Each member has offices to discharge for the benefit of each other member. In the Christian community, as in the organism of the body, *the active co-operation of all the parts is the condition of health*.

One of the famous Aesop’s fables graphically illustrates the function and importance of each member of the body. “In former days there was a quarrel among the members of the human body. Each part professed itself indignant at being obliged to work for the stomach, which remained idle and enjoyed the fruits of their labor. They one and all resolved to rebel and grant it supplies no longer, but to let it shift for itself as well as it could. The hands protested that they would not lift a finger to keep it from starving. The mouth wished it might never speak again if it took the least bit of nourishment for the stomach as long as it lived. The teeth refused to chew for it so much as a morsel for the future. The solemn covenant was kept as long as anything of that kind can be kept, which was till each of the rebel members pined away to skin and bone and could hold out no longer. Then they found there was no doing without the stomach and that, as idle and insignificant as it seemed, it contributed as much to the maintenance and welfare of all the other parts as they did to its welfare.” Each member in the body has its own respective dignity and responsibility.

The Apostle Paul reveals this in the most graphic way in our text. In verses 15-20, he deals with the supposed “inferior” members and functions of the body. Then, in verses 21-24, he deals with the supposed “superior” members and functions of the body. In verses 15-20, Paul speaks of the “*foot*,” the “*hand*,” the “*ear*,” and the “*eye*.” He also suggests the *nose* by a reference to “smelling.” The “*foot*” stands for the *pedal* work of the body; the “*hand*” stands for the *manual* work of the body; the “*ear*” stands for the *aural* work of the body; the “*eye*” stands for the *optical (visual)* work of the body; the nose stands for the *nasal* work of the body. *If you are a Christian, you perform one of these functions, or a similar one, in the body of Christ. I pray that none of us will become paralyzed limbs, but that each of us will be quick to respond to the dictates of the Head. May all members of the body be motivated and moved by the Head!*

We must be careful to understand the message of our text. In verses 15 and 16, Paul supposes a theoretical case in which the foot and the ear, which are *inferior* to the hand and the eye, declare that they do not need these members in the body. However, *all* members are necessary and essential to the healthy functioning of the total body. The body cannot “go” without the feet. The body cannot “serve” or “do” without the hand. The body cannot “hear” without the ear. The body cannot “see” without the eye. The “inferior” foot and ear cannot spurn the “superior” hand and eye without injuring *themselves*. Then, in verse 21, the eye and the head, which are *superior* to the hand and the feet, declare that they do not need these members of the body. However, the “superior” eye and head cannot spurn the “inferior” hand and feet without injuring *themselves*. “God hath tempered the body together” (verse 24), and every member has dignity and responsibility.

Look closely for a moment at the functions Paul mentions, and seek to locate *your own* dignity and responsibility.

First, he mentions the “foot” (verse 15), the “feet” (verse 21). The feet represent the mobility of the body. How important are the “feet” in the body of Christ! They enable the body to fulfill the first mandate of the Great Commission, “Go!” How many there are who seem to be in the body, but never *go*, and don’t seem to sympathize with those who do!

Second, Paul mentions the “hand” (verses 15 and 21). The hand represents the manual work of the body. “Do with your might what your hand finds to do.”

This thought was beautifully expressed in an incident that happened in a little village in France after the war. A detachment of soldiers had been left as occupational troops to keep order in the town. Time hung heavy on their hands. One day they decided to help the villagers restore their bombed homes and city. They started on the church. It was a big job, for the church had received a direct hit. They worked joyously and cheerfully, cleaning up debris, putting back the windows, and rebuilding the pews. Amid the debris they found a marble statue of Christ. It was badly broken, but they managed to cement it together and set it up in its niche in the wall. But search as they would, they could not find the *hands* for the statue of Christ. And so when they had finished arranging the statue in its place, a moment of inspiration came to one of them. He made a placard and hung it on the statue. These simple words were printed on it. “He has no hands but yours.” There is plenty of manual work that needs to be done day by day and week by week. Could this be *your* function?

Third, Paul mentions the “ear” (verse 16). There is a crucial need for hearing in today’s church. We live in a noisy world. The din has dulled our sense of hearing. How important it is that the body of Christ “lend an ear” to God and to man! *We do not read of Jesus ever talking to His disciples on how to speak. He talked much about how to hear.* He said, “Take heed how you hear.” Does the church need a hearing aid? Perhaps, but most of all, it needs functioning ears! Could this be *your* function in the body?

Fourth, Paul mentions the “eye” (verses 16 and 21). The eye is the symbol of spiritual vision. The church needs open eyes and unimpeded vision! “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” Could this be *your* function?

Finally, Paul mentions the “smelling,” or the nose (verse 17). Paul seems to shrink from naming some Christians as nasal men, but he does imply their existence (and their necessity) in the phrase, “If the whole body were hearing, where were the smelling?” Let it be freely acknowledged that, in the course of the centuries, *the church has had reason to be grateful for her spiritual noses*—men like

Athanasius and Luther. The ability to smell represents a sensitiveness to wrong. Which one of us has never experienced an offended olfactory nerve and cried out, “What *is* that I *smell*?” Admittedly, compared with the *other* senses, smell is in dishonor. People boast of 20-20 vision, but no one takes a bow on being told that he has a 50-50 power of scent, or whatever figures as a good average for a bloodhound. But the church needs its “nose” today! In fact, *one of the great problems of today is that the church has a badly stopped-up nasal passage*, and often can’t recognize foulness—of doctrine and practice! Could this be *your* function in the body of Christ?

You see, the “eye” (the church’s *vision*) cannot say to the “hand” (the church’s *service*), “I have no need of you,” or again the “head” (the church’s *creative ideas*) to the “feet” (the churches *plodding, faithful going*) “I have no need of you.” These words cannot be repeated too often. They make a powerful declaration that the ideas of the mind and the vision of the eye need the hands and the feet to give them value. Many self-sufficient heads in the body of Christ have said to the hand, “I have no need of you.” They feel that the idea itself is enough. Or the eye says to the hand, “I have no need of you.” A lovely vision is enough. Of course, all of these organs, and their functions, are essential—if the body is to be healthy. The thinking of the head, the smelling of the nose, and the functioning of all the other members—all are imperative! *Effective Christianity is always an operating conspiracy of eye, mind, hands, feet, nose, etc.*—getting orders and energy from Jesus the Head of the body.

Let’s conclude with a critical reminder and an urgent question. *The reminder*: any one Christian by inconsistency and unfaithfulness can weaken the life of the church, and the spiritual power of the entire body can never exceed that which is possessed by its combined membership. And *the question*: what if the body of Jesus of Nazareth had served the Son of God no better than you and I are serving Him? What if, that day when Jesus stood beneath the sycamore tree and looking up, saw little Zacchaeus, His marvelous *voice* had refused to vocalize saying, “No, the man is a sinner! a despised tax gatherer; I shall not speak to him”? What if, when they brought the poor wretch of a woman and threw her at His feet, the *heart* of Jesus had become hard and cruel, saying, “I refuse to open to this woman in loving forgiveness. No! Condemn her!” But none of these things happened. The body of Jesus responded to the great heart of the unique Son of God.

If you are not in His body, receive Christ today, and let His Spirit insert you into His body, as a member in particular. If you are in His body, receive and pursue His directive with every step you take, and “abide in Him” that His Life may “abide in you,” and that you may “bear much fruit” for His glory. May God grant it!