

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

We're still on the subject of spiritual gifts, we're shining the main beam on the second half of 1 Corinthians 12 in today's study. The emphasis here is that there is one body and many parts—you will notice that Paul gives us some analogies from anatomy! Before we get there though, let me introduce you to three wrong assumptions people often make about the gifts. In fact, these are assumptions that could effectively cripple the body of Christ.

Wrong assumption number one says that 'only the visible are vital'. We often think that the one which is seen and heard is more capable and more important than we are. But that's just not true! Think about the body—what happens when you go to the doctor for a medical? What does he do first? He doesn't check to see if your head is still straight or whether your face is still the same, he checks your vital signs: your pulse, your temperature, your blood pressure—those are all things we can't see!

Wrong assumption number two says that 'only the public gifts will be rewarded'. We often think that it's only those who are up front, who do it day in and day out, who will come off with the top rewards at the judgment seat of Christ. Simply untrue! Look at the Bible. See what happens in Hebrews 6:10 to those who serve unnoticed: 'God is not unjust, he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.'

You see, through God's one way mirror, he sees our hidden ministries. And he will reward us for any and every task done in his name. Paul said as much when comparing his own work with that of Apollos, he wrote in 1 Corinthians 3:8 that 'each will be rewarded according to his own labour'. Get that: Paul wasn't favoured over the more eloquent Apollos, and neither is someone else over you. God weighs each of us in relation to how we use our own gift.

Wrong assumption number three says that 'only the head of the body is important'. This rings so close to true that some people

would be shocked to consider it false. Since Christ is the head of the body of believers, some may assume that only the head is important. Paul says otherwise in 12:21, but more about that in a few minutes! Certainly, Christ alone is the head, but he alone does not perform all the functions of the body.

We do that! We do that by following and implementing his overall strategy, we do that by carrying out his directions, we do that by relying on his power. So, even though you may not feel up to it, or feel like it, you really are valuable to the Lord. You matter to him. In fact, so much so, that he died to redeem you. And that redemption is for a purpose, it is so that you can play a vital role in his eternal drama.

In verses 12 and 13 Paul is informing us that in a body there are many parts and one unit! To his credit, Paul doesn't get into a dry theological discussion; instead of going down that route, he explains the spiritual oneness of the body of Christ by making a comparison to the union of the parts of our physical body.

You see, from the tops of our hard skulls down to the soft soles of our feet, each part of our bodies, though diverse, is united as a whole. So says Paul, each member of the church of Christ is an integral part of the same unit. And he tells us why in verses 13 and 14 – it's because of the Holy Spirit's ministry that we are all part of the same unit. It doesn't matter who you are, or where you're from, or what you do—if you know Jesus, you're in the body!

That happened at the moment of your conversion, that moment when you were immersed into the body of Christ, that is the baptism of the Holy Spirit that Paul refers to in verse 13 when he writes: 'For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free, and we were all given the one Spirit to drink'. It has nothing to do with us, it has everything to do with him. It's not selective for an elitist few, it's all embracing for none are omitted. There are no partial Christians, no partial members of Christ's body. The Lord has no halfway houses for his

children, none are out in a state of limbo. We're in! We're all in! In the final analysis, it's a classic case of many parts and one unit! We'll take a short music break at this point and when we come back I want us to examine further Paul's comments on the role of the body of Christ in today's postmodern world.

MUSIC BREAK

You can tell that Paul is really warming to his theme for he can't stop talking about it in the next section of chapter 12. He says pretty much the same thing again in verse 14 when he writes that 'the body is not made up of one part but of many'. Yes, there are many different parts, that's true—but, each part is incredibly important—not one part can be done without! It seems to me that we see Paul at his best right here, he builds on the picture and he does it with a fair bit of imagination and humour—his whole aim is to illustrate the significance of each believer in the body of Christ.

He talks about the various parts in verses 15 and 16. Suppose, says Paul, that our feet and our ears could talk! They're not the most attractive parts—do you think they would talk like this? The plain fact is, even though big ears and filthy feet are less appealing than clean hands and bright sparkling eyes, they are still regarded as essential to the whole body. And, in the same way, every member of the body of Christ performs an amazing and invaluable function for the entire body.

He speaks of the whole in verse 17 and he shows the absurdity of a human body composed of only one member—it's stupid, it doesn't make an awful lot of sense. Can you visualise it? One body that's one big ear—it would have no sense of smell, it wouldn't be able to see, it couldn't taste anything! Oh yes, it would probably hear a lot, but without the other members, it's not too much use!

Then he talks about the intricate design—you see, we need to keep in mind that God didn't create bodies that have only one function. If he did, they would be grotesque and not really bodies at all, that's the general drift of Paul's comment in verse 19. And, in a similar way, the Lord didn't design the church to have a cluster of members

who all possess the same spiritual gifts—but, as he says in verse 18: ‘he has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.’ Oh yes, we’re all one, but we’re not all the same!

Paul then takes the argument a logical step further for he says: ‘Yes, there are many different parts, and that’s fine, but they’re all interdependent!’ In a healthy body of believers, all the members depend on each other, they lean on each other, they help each other function at their best—their desire is for their fellow members to reach optimum performance.

Paul says in verses 21-24 that there’s absolutely no room for a spirit of independence among the members. We read: ‘The eye cannot say to the hand, I don’t need you. And the head cannot say to the feet, I don’t need you. On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honour to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.’ There’s no place for spiritual mavericks or spiritual go-it-a-loner’s. There is no mileage in us adopting the attitude that says: ‘they don’t need me’ and ‘I don’t need them’. An eye may be able to see a hurt child, but it could never reach out to comfort the child like a hand could; and a head wouldn’t have much information to process if the feet didn’t carry it around. In the same way, some members in the body of Christ seem so insignificant on the surface—but like the tiny bones of the inner ear that hold part of the secret to the world of hearing, they are desperately needed by all the other members—the bottom line, not one can be done without!

Then in verses 25 and 26 Paul gives us a perfectly valid case to back up his belief in interdependence. He explains why God created us in this manner and why we operate best in that way, the fact is we

need each other! Paul says: 'If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.'

Put it like this: if you have infected tonsils, it affects more than just your throat, they affect the way your entire body feels—if you've ever had it, you will know you find it hard to eat, sing, talk, or sleep! You see just as the whole body suffers when one member is sick, so the body is rejuvenated when that member is restored to health. Yes, your life impacts mine, and vice versa, more than we often realise. That's what makes the body such a wonderful God-made vehicle. And that's what makes Paul's analogy such a brilliant one for it's one that we can all identify with.

We'll stop for a short musical interlude and when we come back I want us to see what Paul says in his closing comments in chapter 12. It's a fitting finale, if ever there was one!

MUSIC BREAK

Paul brings his thinking to a finale when he says: yes, there are many parts, but none are exclusive. Here he underlines the spiritual side of the analogy when he explains that there is no such thing as an exclusive gift in the body of Christ. One of the problems in Corinth was that some folks had inflated the value of the gift of tongues, they made it the hallmark of spirituality, they made it the benchmark of whether you were a Christian or not, so Paul seizes the moment to set them straight.

Paul does it by asking a series of loaded rhetorical questions in verses 29 and 30. The wise apostle enquires: 'Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?' Before that in verses 27 and 28 he makes it absolutely clear that no single gift is all-important! He says if you were to put different gifts on a scale, they wouldn't all weigh the same! Did you notice the order in which he listed the gifts? He stresses the fact that just as no human body is exclusively an eye, so the body of Christ isn't composed of people who have the same gift! That makes a lot of very good sense, doesn't it—in situations like that, that's where Paul

excels, he has a fantastically logical mind and it shows—an analytical mind is what he's been blessed with.

You can see Paul's approach here is truly inspirational—first of all, he mentions certain gifted men and then he outlines certain spiritual gifts. He doesn't give an exhaustive list, far from it; he illustrates them, repeating some, deleting others, and adding others—basically he shows us the rich diversity of gifts within the body of Christ. He underlines three key points in all that he says: sovereignty, unity, and diversity.

It's worth noting that the gifted men that Paul mentions are all 'appointed' by the sovereign God to their particular role. This listing should be compared with Paul's comments in Ephesians 4:11. The first two offices mentioned are those of 'apostle' and 'prophet'. They had three basic responsibilities: one, to lay the foundation of the church as in Ephesians 2:20; two, to receive and declare the revelation of God's word as in Ephesians 3:5; and, three, to give confirmation of that word through 'signs and wonders and miracles' as in 2 Corinthians 12:12.

It seems to me that their time is up, we have in our hands the complete word of God, that's all we need—therefore the role of apostle and prophet is no longer required. We don't have time to go into that in detail right now but when we come to study in Ephesians 2 and 4, I'll go into it in much more detail.

The role of the teacher in the early church, as in today's church, is absolutely crucial to the spiritual growth of God's people. In a sense, they are the kingpins in seeing the church develop and prosper, they would instruct the people well in matters of truth and error, they would ground them in the biblical doctrines of grace and glory.

The second half of verse 28 lists several representative spiritual gifts, both temporary and permanent. We looked at the first two that are mentioned in yesterday's study, that of 'workers of miracles and gifts of healing'. We'll talk about tongues when we get to it in chapter 14.

Paul also speaks of 'those able to help others'—by that he has in mind those who help and support others in a day-by-day role, very often the work goes unnoticed and unseen except by those on the receiving end. It has the idea of serving others. But the word that Paul uses here is a beautiful word for it has the idea of taking the burden off someone else and placing it on oneself. An essential gift for every fellowship.

He also refers to 'those with gifts of administration'—I reckon he is talking here about the gift of leadership. The term comes from steering or piloting a ship, and is so used in Acts 27:11. It refers to one who keeps a ship, or a church, on course toward its proper destination. They know where they're going and, in God's good time, get there.

It seems that Paul's main reason for listing the gifts and offices in verse 28 was to stress again the rich diversity of ministries in a local assembly of God's people. Then in verse 29 and 30, he mentions most of them again to reinforce his theory that we are not all given the same gift, and God doesn't intend for everyone to have gifts that are out front and noticed. In his sovereignty, he gives us what he wants us to have, it's as simple as that! It is our responsibility to accept our gifting with gratitude and to use them with faithfulness and diligence.

It is interesting that the two gifts mentioned in verse 28 that are not mentioned in verses 29 and 30 are the gift of 'helps' and the gift of 'administrations', probably the ones least prized by the Corinthians, but clearly the ones for which they had the greatest need! There's a touch of irony there, I'm sure there is!

Paul's parting shot in verse 31 is a powerful one, he writes for them 'to eagerly desire the greater gifts'. A body has many parts and some parts are more important than others, some of them are greater—he says the greater gifts such as prophecy and teaching build up the whole body, the lesser gifts such as tongues build up only a small part (we'll see more of that when we come to 14:1-5).

So, says Paul, let's go for the best, let's aim to build up the body as a whole!

You may be asking the question: why are the gifts important? Let me give you a handful of reasons I've culled from Chuck Swindoll's notes: one, they keep the body balanced for they safeguard us against extremes or flying our own party flag; two, they keep the church healthy—since every believer has a spiritual gift, the burden of ministry can be shared equally. Often times, ministries collapse from exhaustion when too few people are doing too many jobs. When God's people exercise their gifts, they help shoulder the weight, they spread the load, and the church blossoms with a healthy vitality; three, they keep the focus clear for when the spiritual gifts are all working together, our eyes are drawn to the Giver. When that happens, we can't help but glorify him. Let's remember, we need each other, and no one is more important than any other. We're in it together, and we're in it together with him!