

Needing Each Other, I Corinthians 12:12-31

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Introduction

As we continue to talk about the Holy Spirit we are moving forward from describing the event of when He comes in His baptism, the exciting revivals that follow on the pattern of the first Pentecost Sunday. What we are talking about now, on the surface of it, is more mundane. In First Corinthians Paul describes what every-day life with God should like like, and he uses the mundane image of the body. You cannot get more mundane than the body. Paul describe the eye, the ear, the nose, the feet, as all being parts of a body, and that is what our life together as a church is supposed to be like when we are each living for God. We are supposed to function together, normally, mundanely, in an every-day way, like a body.

But for thousands of years, congregations have struggled just as the Corinthians have struggled, on this very issue. What keeps us from this mundane, healthy function that Paul describes are the original sins of envy and pride. Some of us want to run the body ourselves, some of us are arrogant towards other members of the body and think that we can get along without them. And so we hop along with one foot, no arms, and three heads, because we think we know better than God what we need.

If we want anointing in power and wisdom we need to allow Christ to be our head, and we need to start honoring each other as members of one body dedicated to the same purpose – the glory of God.

Let us Pray: Lord, by One Spirit you call us together. Fill each heart in this time of meditation on the Word of Christ, that we might become one in the unity you desire of us. Amen.

1. One Spirit, One Body

I believe that this text applies not only to local congregations but to the whole Church. I believe the reason we need many denominations is that it is impossible for one church under a single human administration to encompass every form and expression of faith. Our cultures are just too diverse, and theology itself is just too complex. There are a few essentials about which all Christians must agree; many of these are summed up in the ancient creeds. There are also many disputable matters. It does not trouble me that there are so many Christian denominations, so long as we respect each other's role in the global Body of Christ.

The problem is the lack of respect, and that is why people looking from the outside in wonder why the Christians have such problems. Some less than 500 years ago at the Colloquy of Marburg two of the leading Church Reformers met together to see if they could find common ground. Martin Luther led one Reformation, and Ulrich Zwingli led the other. The two disagreed about many things relating to Church government, Church and society, and the mysteries of communion. Now on the one hand we can see that here is a very good example of why there are so many denominations; it is because, once you get beyond the essentials of Christian faith, there is a huge range of opinion about disputable matters for which the Bible itself presents a diversity of witnesses, such as communion. But on the other hand as the meeting concluded Luther said to Zwingli, "You and I are not of the same Spirit." In other words, as far as Luther was concerned, Zwingli was starting a new religion.

Luther was wrong. He and Zwingli were of the same Spirit. But they defined themselves by their differences rather than by their agreements, to the point that they could not discern the Spirit in each other.

Now if two such great theological minds can be guilty of this error, think about those with whom you disagree. Do you ever ask yourself, “I wonder if she is EVEN a Christian???”

That kind of thing happens around here, because we are so focused on wanting to hear God ourselves that we do not know how to hear God speak through others. It is our sinful, human nature to be defensive about the things we are not good at, and to tell ourselves that the reason we are not good at – say, being organized -- is that it must not be all that important anyway. And so we get irritated with the person who is always organized, ducks in a row, schedules set. We denigrate what that person is good at – being organized -- as something unimportant in life, as something unrelated to the approval and gifts of God. Meanwhile that organized person is denigrating your free-spirited spur-of-the-moment impulsive lifestyle as something unrelated to your purpose in God. Paul’s point is that we need each other. The free spirit cannot say to the organized person, “I have no need of you,” and the organized person cannot wash his hands of the free-spirited person, thinking life would be better without any spontaneity. They need each other. Without each other, the witness to Christ is incomplete.

2. Equal Concern

One of the opening sequences to the movie Monty Python’s *The Holy Grail* shows a black knight blocking the path of King Arthur, and challenging him. So they fight and Arthur cuts off the knight’s arm. He now expects to be able to pass by. The knight says, “I wasn’t using it anyway, it was only a flesh wound.” Arthur proceeds to cut off his other arm and both his legs before he passes by the knight, who is still shouting defiance at him and threatening to fight him with his teeth.

Some of us think we would do better if we just cut off parts of the body of Christ with whom we disagree. We suppose that we can mix it up in spiritual conflict against the devil and

temptation, that we can take a stand on issues in our society and culture and politics, without our arms and legs, with just our mouths talking a big game. The part of the church body which is the mouth, is the preacher, who is often considered more important than all the other parts of the body. I discern that many churches have had their limbs chopped off, but because they still have a loud-mouth at the pulpit they are telling themselves that they are still in the fight and might even be winning it.

Just because churches have a lot to say with their mouths, their preachers, that does not mean churches are actually fighting the spiritual battles of our world, or are even engaged in them. We need to become whole and healthy again—we have little idea just how ill and vulnerable and needy, how poor, blind and naked, we really are. When parts of the body are suffering, that affects the function of the whole body. We need to be caring and concerned for each other.

The path to wholeness is humility concerning our own talents and abilities, and appreciation for the talents and abilities of others. This is especially important when we own that one person's weakness can be another person's strength. Rather than being envious or defensive, you can celebrate that God has given someone else an ability that was lacking in yourself. In that way, in church, no one part of the body should be elevated above all the others. Yes, the mouth is important, but all the parts are important. The hands of the church body must be extended in work and help, the feet of the body must carry the church to places of lostness and need, the ears must be patient in listening, the eyes must be attentive to what is coming over the horizon. If everyone was a preacher, nothing would get done when it came to the bills and the maintenance. If everyone were good at administration no one would be sharing the gospel. We are a priesthood of all believers; everyone must take a part in the redemptive ministry of the church they attend.

God has given you ability so that you may give God glory. Let us celebrate your ability with you and release you to serve in that ability for the sake of Christ and his Kingdom.

3. Eager Desire

Paul writes, “But eagerly desire the greater gifts.” It is not clear what the greater gifts are, until he describes in chapter 14 verse 1 that gifts that build up the church by reaching the lost, such as prophecy, are greater, and to be sought more eagerly, than gifts which excite one’s own spirit, such as ecstasies while in prayer. In any event, the believers in Corinth thought of themselves as being rich in spiritual gifts, but Paul was telling them to seek the ones that establish and strengthen the Church.

Craig Blomberg for the NIV Application Commentary wrote that he saw in the order that Paul presented the gifts, the pattern that was needed for a church to be planted. First, an apostle, that is a missionary, would call people to repentance and gather them into community. Then, teachers and preachers impart the full content of the faith. The church would begin to function with healing, compassion and fellowship ministries. As things get more complex a supervisory administration would be set in place to oversee all the operations of the church. Blomberg does not quote how tongues fit the picture, coming last, but I will posit this: That perhaps when the church is at this place where its people are feeling the joy of being used by God, that then they are wanting to return to a posture of prayer, to remain close and in touch with God, that the cycle of revival repeats: Tongues arrive as a sign of fresh revival, and then, missionaries are sent again to plant new congregations.

Several years ago I cast a vision that I would like to see Elgin Covenant become a church that plants churches. I have not mentioned that for many years so maybe you have forgotten about it, or had hoped I had forgotten about it. But the word of God is a stubborn thing, it refuses

to return empty. Through our time of teaching on the Holy Spirit I have asked you, several times, why do you want revival? What do you think the anointing of the Holy Spirit is for? Anointing, revival, is always linked to mission. And by listing tongues where he does, Paul is not just tossing in the embarrassing one to appease the charismatics. No, Paul was charismatically gifted himself, and he prayed in more tongues more often than all of those Corinthians, and more authentically. And what happened? Everywhere he went, people were saved and churches were started. What were the Corinthians doing with their babel sounds? That is the question Paul is asking them. If they have the power of God they ought to be in mission, seeking the gift of prophecy, that the world may know the Word and come to Christ.

There are at least three lists of spiritual gifts in the New Testament, here, and in Romans 12, and Ephesians 4. None of these lists is comprehensive. The direct instruction from Paul is that these gifts are for you, the believer in Jesus, for you to discern and to exercise, not all of them but a few as God has given to you, in order that you may fully function in his body, the church.

Conclusion

When it comes to discerning how you might be gifted, that is also a matter for the whole community. I mentioned taking a multi-choice spiritual gifts inventory which you may see me about. Another way to find out is to ask people how they have been blessed by you. Reflect on the things you enjoy doing that others seem to appreciate. And then talk to me about your ability to serve and our ability to send you into service. Our desire is for every member of the body to be fully engaged in the mission and life of the Church, so that God may be glorified, every day. Amen.