

1 Corinthians 12.12-31

Building... one body with many parts

Amington (Online)

Sunday 27 September 2020

Build, build, build (9)

Christ's Body

Which body part hurts most when you get hit by a right-angled triangle?

Your sinuses. Who doesn't like a Maths joke??

St Paul wrote this: **Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with** the church.

Or did he?

Sometimes when we read the Bible we don't really read it; we read what we expect it to say, rather than what it actually says. Here is what Paul actually says:

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is **with Christ**.

1 Corinthians 12.12 (NIV)

Paul doesn't say 'with the church' he says **with Christ**. This reminds us *who* is most important: Christ, not us. The church isn't a loose collection of people – it's the body of Christ.

We might put it like this:

on earth Jesus worked through a human body
from heaven Jesus works through a body of humans

Verse 27: **Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it**: Jesus, the body comes first; the parts, we come second.

In some cultures it is common to put your family name *before* your individual name. It sounds weird to us Westerners – I would be Green Ben instead of Ben Green – but sometimes we need to be reminded that the people in the Bible lived in a world quite different to 21st century England! And, we need to be reminded that the way we are today is not necessarily right or the best.

The Holy Spirit

We need to rewind a little bit however, to see how Paul begins this chapter. **Now about the things of the Spirit**, he says, **I do not want you to be uninformed** (1).

First, and most importantly, the Spirit brings faith – that is, only the Holy Spirit enables us to say – and *mean* – **‘Jesus is Lord’** (3). The Holy Spirit is not a special gift for clergy, or preachers, or anyone else for that matter. *All* Christians are given the Spirit.

The Spirit brings different things to different people – but it’s the *same Spirit* at work in each of us (4), the *same God* working in and through each of us (6).

Second, the gifts the Spirit brings with him are not for our personal gain, but **for the common good** (7). In other words, the gifts, the ministries, the fruit of the Spirit – these are not supposed to be focused inwards, but outwards: to be shared, to help and benefit *others* in the body of Christ.

Third, we are ‘in’ the Spirit and the Spirit is ‘in’ us – like the air which is all around us, and within us when we breathe. In verse 13 Paul says:

In one Spirit we all were baptised into one body... and we all were given one Spirit to drink.

1 Corinthians 12.13 (my translation)

In the first thirteen verses of this chapter, the word ‘Spirit’ appears thirteen times – which means all this stuff in our reading about ‘the body’ is also all about ‘the Spirit’.

We’ll come back to that later.

Every Part

What is the most reliable body part? Your fingers. Why? Well, you can always count on them.

We don’t know exactly what situation he was responding to with this letter, but it appears that some people in the church in Corinth were looking down on others, regarding themselves as superior.

So Paul points out that *every* part of the body belongs:

Now if the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.

1 Corinthians 12.15-16 (NIV)

It's a ridiculous thing to say, isn't it? I mean, *of course* the foot is part of the body! *Of course* the ear is part of the body! It's absurd to suggest otherwise.

But I wonder if sometimes we can fall into the same trap as the Corinthians – and either look down on others, or the flip side of that: feel like we are outsiders, and not really part of the body?

No, Paul says: every part matters, every part belongs.

But, every part is *not* the same. Paul carries on:

If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be?

1 Corinthians 12.17-19 (NIV)

Thank goodness we aren't all like me – or all like you. We can't all be preachers. We can't all be musicians. We can't all be church wardens. We can't all be cleaners. We can't all serve refreshments. We can't all lead Sunday School. We can't all visit the sick – and so on.

Again, sometimes we can fall into the trap of thinking that if we don't do certain things, we can't or don't need to do anything at all; and often those things are the 'up front' things.

But just as the body needs the ear to listen, and the eye to see, and the stomach to digest, and the eyebrows to do whatever eyebrows are for – so Christ's body needs every part, every one of us to play our part. Otherwise the body is weaker and misses out.

You see, every part *matters*. When Paul writes about **weaker** (22) or **less honourable** (23) or **less respectable** (23) parts of the body, his point is to remind us that:

there should be no division in the body, but its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.

1 Corinthians 12.25-26 (NIV)

Weak or strong, obvious or hidden, every part matters, every part is important, every part deserves to be loved and cared for.

In summary: (1) Every part *is* part of the body. (2) Every part is unique and has a part to play. (3) Every part matters.

What About You?

Back in ancient Egypt, the standardised units of measurement were based on the current Pharaoh's body. His index finger would be one unit of measurement, his forearm another, and so on.

You could say that Pharaoh was the ruler.

So what about us? What about *you*? Well I have two questions for us to think about.

We saw earlier that 'the body', Christ's body, the church, comes first in Paul's thinking. Where does it come in yours?

The way of working that out is how much time you give to the church – either in its broad sense, or in the local sense, here in Amington. Another way is how you give financially: do you give the dregs, the spare change, what's left after you've bought all the things you want for yourself – or do you give of your *first* and *best*, sacrificially, generously, joyfully? If everyone in our church family actually gave sacrificially, we could pay our full Parish Share, afford to pay for a part-time administrator, a full-time mission worker, and have plenty left over.

Paul gives various lists of gifts and ministries that the Spirit brings, listing here apostles, prophets, teachers, and so on (28). Those are for another time.

For today I'd like to highlight one little word: *antilempseis*, 'helpful deeds'. So our second question is: how can *you* be helpful?

Sometimes people sit back and say, 'Well, no-one *asked* me to help.' For starters that's not true – but it's also not good enough. God gives the same Spirit to each one of us – so each one of us has a responsibility to use and make the most of what God has given.

This is always important, but especially so in times of crisis – for God didn't stop sending the Holy Spirit in January when COVID started to spread in earnest. The government might be able to keep us apart – with good reason – but it can't stop us being still together, it can't stop us doing 'helpful deeds'. It may require a bit of imagination, but God is never short of ideas.

Where does the body of Christ come in your thinking?

How can you be helpful?

I am going to pray now for what David Prior calls **expectant openness** (Prior, *BST*, 212). We need to be open to the work of the Spirit, because God rarely forces himself upon us – he gives us a choice. And we need to be expectant, because God’s gift of the Spirit to us is both a truth and a promise.

Let’s pray.

Father, help us be open and to expect your Spirit to work in and through us. Help us put Jesus first, his body, every part, before our own needs and desires and wants. Show us how we can be helpful, and equip us to serve one another, to love one another, to play our part in the body. Amen.