

January 24, 2010

Members of the Body

Paul had mail. The church in Corinth had questions for Paul. He had started that church then moved on. Apparently they wrote to him about what was going on back in the Corinthian church. I say Corinth, but that church could be in Columbus, or Cleveland, or Canton, or closer. They wrote to him about their *spirituality, and his view which Christians in that church were indeed the most spiritual people*. The church was full of quarreling, competing over who was more spiritual. Groups were formed, cliques. In particular, some were “speaking in tongues” as evidence of the Spirit of God in them. They were arrogantly boasting their spiritual superiority over others in the church.

That notion of spiritual achievement still plagues Gospel preachers today, people wanting from them help with spiritual advancement, as if that is the good news of Christian faith and the goal of Christian life. As if Jesus came to make us to be more spiritual people. Had not Paul preached that it is not what we do but what Christ did -- not our spiritual accomplishment, but Christ’s physical body in the manger, on the cross, and at the tomb that makes all the difference? I suspect that before Paul wrote back to them, he locked himself in a tent and went on an exasperated rant, pulling out his hair.

Paul begins his response to this in chapter 12, “Now concerning these spiritual *things...*” (best translation of vs.1) you have brought up. Don’t you know they are *gifts*? “Now there are varieties of gifts” -- spiritual gifts from God -- given out among you. But they are gifts, not your spiritual achievement in the church, but God’s grace and blessing. They are not about you, but what God gives you: variety of gifts, including wisdom and knowledge and faith and healing and yes speaking in tongues, and they are all from God, every one of them. They are not given to bring you honor, but to be used for the common good in and beyond the church. The same Spirit of God gives you different gifts, different kinds of service to perform, different kinds of working with others.

Think of it this way, says Paul, think of the church as a **body**. This is a body made up of members: feet, hands, head, heart, kidney (gizzard?). You are a member of this body. This is not like any other membership, unlike your membership in the 4-H club or Rotary or French Club, on the wrestling team or school choir, or Republican party or AARP or such social organizations. With those you join, have your name on the roll, pay your dues, identify and participate as a member in what they are doing. The church membership is not that, not just a group of Christians with a common identity and agenda.

You are the Body of Christ. As you have been baptized into the body, you are now made part of the body of Christ. Verse 27 says it, “*Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it.*” A real body, the church, a living body, Christ’s body... and you are a member of the body.

Let's say you are the foot. The foot cannot deny it belongs to the whole body. Doesn't the blood from the rest of the body flow through the foot keeping it alive? Does the rest of the body go for a hike and leave the foot at home to watch football? Likewise, (says Paul) with you as a member of the church. Once baptized into the body of Christ, you cannot pretend that you have no place here, as if the foot could still be a member without the rest of the body. But the Spirit of Christ flowing throughout the body makes you a living part of the body.

Furthermore, a member of the body -- let's say the nose -- cannot pretend that it is the entire body... all one big nose. You Corinthians speaking in tongues, how can you act like that is the whole of being Christian? One big strange tongue! The same goes for a member's teaching, or another's music, or a member's understanding of scripture, or another's moral conviction -- each an important part, but the part is not the whole body.

Nor can one member of the body -- how about the mouth -- cannot dismiss another member as not needed. The mouth would notice if the head were missing (at least in most cases). The body of Christ is made for the members to depend upon each other. In ancient times, others used the body analogy, usually to keep people in their places -- if slaves will be slaves and the ruling class rule, then the body of Rome will be just fine. But Paul says the body of Christ is about interdependence of the members. God even honors the less respected members above the others so there will be no dissention but unity in the body. And so the members instead of resenting one another will take care of each other. In this body, if one member suffers, all do. When your head aches, the rest of you feels punk as well.

Get it? Paul wants to know. *"You are the body of Christ and individually members of it."* I am not saying that is how it **should** be. That is **how it is**. That is how God has made the church. You may prefer to think of the church as becoming more fully the body of Christ by what we do... playing nice, being inclusive, getting along together... doing your part, being responsible, not letting the rest of us down... by this we will be more the body of Christ today than yesterday. No. The church IS Christ's body. God makes it that way. God does the saving, brings the grace, makes this congregation the body of Christ. That is the way it is.

God makes *you* a member through baptism. Now you are to ***be a member***, function as a member of the body, and use your spiritual gifts to fulfill your part of the body. If God has brought you here, if this is where you are supposed to be, then *what is your membership?* Not *where* is your membership (at 1st UCC or at Hilltop Fellowship), but *what?! What part of the body are you?* Ask yourself not if others here can make you feel welcome, valued, happy. The question is: What is your part here -- member of the body -- and how can you do it? How can you use the spiritual gifts which God has given you? Use them for the common good of the body of Christ? How can you be the member you are, by the grace of God?

The church in Corinth asked questions about spirituality. Paul's answer was about the **body**. It still is: *"Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."*

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