1Corinthians 12:21-31

The Body of Christ II

# Introduction

Paul carries forward through chapter 12 the direction for unity through the Holy Spirit’s manifestation. His work with the church had led to their response to the gospel, an establishment of leaders, and then a collapse due to an inability for those in authority to abide and be directed by the Holy Spirit. The focus of this section is on the body and its manifestation of the Holy Spirit as a collective being purposeful, a synthesis of the first two thirds of this chapter. As we read through this last third of chapter 12 keep in mind that Paul was writing a prescription to heal a body – and the body in Corinth was exceptionally sick.

## Observations

### The Body

The body was a term that we see showing up in the New Testament and not previously in the Old Testament. Paul introduces us to it in 1 Corinthians 10:17 when he refers to the communion bread [representing the body of Christ] being the thing that unites us into one body. This principle being a New Testament principle we find that it was a new doctrine and those coming from a Jewish background would need to be introduced to the idea given that their previous cultural heritage would have separated them from the Greeks and the idea of union through a single federal head would have linked them *as a family* to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

### The Culture

The Corinthians had a high level of spiritual openness due to the Roman culture’s willingness to let you believe anything as long as you also believed Caesar was a god. Many people belonged to a mystery cult that was incredibly secretive. The ceremonies of the cults would have been at times very personal and involvement would have been ego driven within a culture of classes and strong personalities. The Corinthian church appears to have been weak in its ability to handle the culture around it, clamoring for the same sort of spiritual involvement to drive egotistical clout.

### The Historical Point in Time & the Establishment of the Church

As has been pointed out at times it is important to realize that Paul is going to address the Holy Spirit’s movement within this specific time to establish the church. We’re going to see in verse 28 that God had chosen this specific time to start the church when the majority of the world’s population was reachable with the gospel, the Greek Koine language was technical and specific enough to clearly carry doctrine, but had been simplified by Alexander the Great so that the masses would be able to take it on. The Holy Spirit would establish the church in ways that the Jews would not be able refute the veracity of the gospel, and the Greeks would be highly interested in the gospel because the church contrasted with the culture’s tradition of secrecy, but also had among other things a valuable distinction from the stoics in many areas where God was stable, suffering had a meaning, and eternity had a purpose.

## Cessationism

Holly Hills teaches cessationism, which is the theological name for the idea that the miraculous spiritual gifts given to establish (but not maintain) the church seceded once the church was established and the Apostles were killed or died. This is not a common teaching amongst some churches and we realize that. Since we’re in the thick of gifts we need to evaluate the scriptures that we think teach that and recognize that 1st Corinthians is one of the key books in discussing spiritual gifts as well as studying the doctrine of cessation. Key ideas and passages that cessationists point to are the following:

* In the book of Acts the church is established with a powerful introduction of the Holy Spirit and the gospel is shared in many *known* tongues and Jewish people from around the world who were in Jerusalem (Acts 2:4-6) responded to that clear presentation of the gospel.
* The apostles by the leading of the Holy Spirit perform miraculous works, but when the Holy Spirit is asked for by Simon the sorcerer they rebuke him because the Holy Spirit was not a ‘thing to be bought or sold’.
* Every time tongues appears in Acts Jews are present and God uses the language gift to validate His move there to the Jews. Peter brings the news of the Gentiles speaking in Tongues (Acts 10:46) as an inauguration of the church outside of Israel to the other elders of the church in Acts 11:15.
* When Paul writes to the Corinthians in chapter 13 verses 8-10 he refers to the gifts being a partial reflection of doctrinal truth, but says that when the ‘perfect’ comes the partial will be done away with. This is a key passage in describing the idea that in a future time when the New Testament was complete the need for the Spirit’s patchwork revelation would be done away with.

# Exposition

## And the believer cannot say to the other believer, "I have no need of you"

The believers in Corinth who were full of carnal division may have viewed their class, their wealth, their resources, and their skills to give them superiority, but Paul is working through an analogy that causes them to be behaving in a way that is utterly foolish. As believers we tend to find others that rub us the wrong way; others whom we don’t understand. This verse tells us that we can’t snub them and tell them that they don’t have any value to us. In fact the Greek word here carries with it the idea that they don’t even have the power to do so.

*What value do the weak have to the strong?*

*What value do the strong have to the weak?*

## The Necessarily Weak

22 On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; 23 and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, 24 whereas our more presentable members have no need of it.

While we may focus on the idea of the weak here there’s a wonderful analogy of God’s work to take the weak and unpresentable and less honorable and make them beautiful. On a practical level our estimation of someone else’s honorability is rather arrogant. In humility we can properly esteem one another, observe God’s work in the growth of our own lives, and praise God for what He is doing. When we see this reference to weakness Paul is giving honor to those who are new in Christ, those who are suffering, and those who are poor. Their earthly condition does not have an impact on their value in God’s sight so Paul chastens the believers in Corinth who may have chosen to look at their brothers and sisters in Christ in a way that doesn’t reflect God’s view.

*Why do we view the weak with disdain when they’re God’s children?*

## God Has Composed

But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, 25 so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

“God has composed…,” is the beginning of an idea that lets us understand the body in light of God’s sovereign care for us as individuals and us as an organism. We cannot walk away from this text and find our siblings in Christ outside of the light of eternity. If Paul can write that, “while we were yet sinners,” of us then we cannot discriminate. God sovereignly composed the body assembling it so that the hands were hands, the eyes were eyes, and *there are no vestigial organs*.

Furthermore God has given more honor to these weak brothers and sisters in Christ. And He has done this so that there would be *no division* in the body.

*Why should the members be caring for one another?*

Paul tell us here that the care we should be having for one another is rooted in God’s plan for us, in God’s honoring of us, and in who we are in Him! While the subjunctive tense in the Greek conveys some sense of optionality Paul’s clear intent is to convey a responsibility in the church to not allow this heretical idea to take root in our lives: *we’re to love one another* as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit.

## The Members

26 And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. 27 Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it.

While there are probably medical examples of how this analogy doesn’t make sense there are many scenarios where one part of our body not working impacts the rest of our body. Paul’s concern is less the literal exceptions and more the analogy of care. We’re called to serve one another and love one another and care for one another. So we see the weak and we care for them. We see the injured and we care for them. We see the honored and we celebrate together. Because we’re invested in one another and we’re exploring the height and depth and breadth and length of God’s love together we’re together in each other’s lives.

If 1 Corinthians 10:17 were not already clear that we’re the body of Christ Paul repeats himself here and reminds us that we’re part of the many as individuals. Nobody who is saved is outside of the body, though we may have some reclusive members who need to be drawn in. The philosophers would have spent a large amount of time discussing the difference between the one and the many and the politicians would have discussed what value there was in a law based on how one person’s actions might impact the laws which would impact the many (and vice versa), but Paul reminds the believers that they are members of one another in the body.

*What is the number one reason people give for leaving a church body and becoming reclusive?*

## The Establishment of the Church

28 And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues.

If the believers in Corinth thought that their gives brought them honor (instead of a stewardship) Paul reminds them first of their position within the body as under himself as apostle, not to put them under his thumb, but to remind them that honor is OK, but God is to be honored most of all. He then outlines these brand-new-church gifts with the focus on the body (more in chapter 14) and Christ and not on the self. God’s order and the direction of the Spirit means that we don’t get to pick a gift for ourselves, we don’t get to operate within the gift for ourselves, and that we don’t get to pick who in the body we use the gift for or with.

### Apostles

The Apostles are those who saw Christ (Acts 1:21, 9:3-8), were called by God to testify to and spread the gospel (Matthew 28:19-20; 1 John 1:1-4), and were given a ministry to establish the church with a special authority (2 Corinthians 12:12). Since the Lord is not appearing today to establish new Apostles (even the Catholic church does not practice this method of appointment for the pope), we are not lead through scripture to believe that the gift of apostleship is for today.

### Prophets

The prophets that were given throughout the scriptures seem to carry a specific gift: they spoke the word of God for the people to listen to and meditate on. This was not specifically foretelling of future events, but a taking of special revelation through the Holy Spirit. It is worth noting that Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 14:29-37 about prophets in the New Testament that there is a submission to evaluation within this church body so that those who are spiritual can confirm the validity of the message. This is not the same as the message inspired for the apostles and would have been for the church body before the apostolic scriptures were completed.

### Teachers

A teacher is given a ministry to equip those who the Lord has provided to listen. This is for equipping the saints and they are not taking their own revelation (a prophet), but they are understanding and then sharing that understanding. C.f. 1 Timothy 2:7, 2 Timothy 1:11, 2 Timothy 4:3, Hebrews 5:12.

### Miracles

This seems to be a provisional gift that would have benefited the body specifically and at a volume that was related to a person with the gift and not just miracles happening throughout the body at an interval God saw without a specific gifted person involved. While this gift seems to have been for the apostolic era this doesn’t mean that God doesn’t do miraculous things today. C.f. Galatians 3:5.

### Healing

When the apostles went into the temple in Acts 3 they performed a healing. This sort of thing seems to be specifically beneficial to the body and doesn’t appear to be something along the lines of what Benny Hinn purports to be involved with. The Holy Spirit would work through believers to heal in a special way and it would have been used to establish the church and validate God’s ministry. Other cults might have had those in need, but they waited on the gods with the hopes that they might do the miraculous without a specific direction to do so through a gifted agent.

### Help

The gift of helps or helping would have been something along the lines of what a deacon might do. God would have worked through the Spirit to enable service in a supernatural way that might exceed human capacity and be more specifically useful than just human intuition and direction would provide. The body in Corinth being made up of all sorts of folks who were mixed between the poor and rich would have benefited greatly from those who would be able to serve in this capacity.

### Administration

Administration is not one of those gifts that the charismatic movement promotes heavily, but as it turns out within the body with so many people coming and going, so many having need and those who had supplies this governance would allow someone (or various members of the body) to help connect the dots and make sure that the teaching ministry of those who were elders would continue on uninterrupted and that no one was neglected.

### Various Kinds of Tongues

The languages of this gift seem to be known human languages (Acts 2:4-5). They were varied (not a prayer language as purported by some) and they were given for the presentation of the gospel.

## The Uniqueness of Our Ministries

29 All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? 30 All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they?

After establishing that there are various kinds of gifts Paul reinforces the diversity in the body with a series of rhetorical questions: do all have each one of these gifts? It is critical to observe the nature of these gifts: they’re temporal, they’re administered by the Holy Spirit, and they’re not for ourselves. Paul removes the opportunity the saints in Corinth had to take credit by wrapping up this list by presenting the last verse of the chapter which indicates he wants them to seek a better way rather than selfish giftedness.

Paul wrote in verse 7 that as believers we’re given a gift by the Holy Spirit, and the giving is passive to the believer. We don’t choose the gift, we choose to set our minds above, and the Holy Spirit will work in and through us. Our ministry is one of abiding, not of personal will.

## The Greater Gifts & The Greater Way

31 But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.

After outlining the importance of the various “greater” gifts by order in verse 28 Paul calls out the need for the church for them. This is a parallel thought to his corrective writing earlier in 11:19 where a weak, divided church needed proper leadership with proper teaching to restore them to a healthy place. The “greater” gifts would have put the church on a foundation that was focused on Christ and not on themselves. It wouldn’t have been about the gifts, but about the manifestation of the work of the Holy Spirit as the church grew in its understanding of abiding. Then Paul transitions into another section on the misuse of the gifts and a greater way to choose to live as a believer: love!

# Closing Thoughts

If division strikes a church it has one of two sources: the flesh or God because of the flesh. In a culture where money, power, lineage, and influence were key Paul has already argued that the believers should be generous, serving, united through their Christian lineage, and the influence of the Spirit. His care for the body was unquestioned, but he is calling them out on their stability, their education and their understanding of what it means to manifest the Holy Spirit through gifts. This is building in a crescendo towards love and a deeper understanding of the gospel.