

YOU ARE CHRIST'S BODY

“Now you are Christ’s body, and individually members of it.” With this, the apostle Paul ends the New Testament’s clearest teaching about the Body of Christ. Too many of us, however, this concept remains in the realm of “doctrine” to be used for preaching or Bible study. We need to reevaluate our understanding of what it really means to be a member of Christ’s Body, the Church, and the demands this makes on us.

Our Place in the Body

“For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,” it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body,” it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them in the body, just as He desired. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’; or again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary, and those members of the body, which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our unseemly members come to have more abundant seemliness, whereas our seemly members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, that there should be no division in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are Christ’s body, and individually members of it (1 Cor. 12:12-27, NAS).

Paul compares the Church to a human body. But it is much more than a metaphor, although metaphoric in form. Just as our body is the physical

organism by which our life, housed within, expresses itself; so the Church is the physical organism by which Jesus expresses Himself. This is literal reality! Although we aren't literally hands or feet or ears or eyeballs as Paul speaks of us, collectively we are Christ's literal body. We are the only means by which He can express Himself physically on earth.

Paul emphasizes the importance of each individual member. Each member has a necessary function (see vs. 12-24). "For the body is not one member, but many." Every member is necessary to complete the operation of the body. Although our own individual function may seem less glamorous or outstanding ("seemly") than others, our function is no less vital to the health of the body than that of the most prominent member. Besides, God has arranged it in such a way that each member will eventually receive equal honor.

But we must discourage the opposite feeling in ourselves as well. If our particular function is more prominent and comes more often into public view, we need to guard against the idea that less visible, less prominent members are less important, or less necessary than we are! In our physical bodies, many of the joints and most of the vital organs are hidden from view. This is less true in Christ's body. This is one reason why Paul affirms that when we measure ourselves by ourselves and compare ourselves with ourselves, we are without understanding (see 2 Cor. 10:12).

Along with this idea, Paul teaches that there is a diversity of function among the members of the body. Each member plays a different role. Because of this, it is unwise to look at other members to understand our own function. Our function will exhibit a different ability and emphasis, but this should not cause us envy, discouragement, or insecurity. Our desire as an ear shouldn't be to have vision, but rather a very keen sense of hearing.

Although diverse, the various parts of the body are in perfect arrangement because God has placed them *as He has wished* (v.18). A problem which has resulted from the human organization in churches is many people have been put into positions where they are expected to function as God has never intended. Because a man serves well as a deacon doesn't necessarily imply that he will do well as an elder. A prophet shouldn't be expected to function in the role of a pastor, with the same aptitude.

The rule of thumb which applies to all members is to "wait on our ministry." We should all reemphasize the basics of our life in Christ – fellowship, prayer, meditation, communion with God in the Spirit – and wait to see the particular

ability and function which manifests itself in us as a result. This ability will possess a specific emphasis and quality. As soon as you determine what this function is, give yourself wholly to it so it will develop as much as possible. A word of caution here -You should determine your function only with the feedback of the body as a whole. You may think that grace has been given to you as apostle, but then find yourself being received as a pastor by the people. Likely, the chances are that your apostolic aspiration may be somewhat unwarranted.

Paul further points out that all the members depend on one another. What good is a hand without a wrist, a foot without an ankle, a circulatory system without a heart? The common idea of “just Jesus and me” should give way as we realize that Jesus lives in all of our brothers and sisters collectively, as well as individually. We need everyone else in the body if we are going to make it to completeness! “If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be?”

Our Function in the Body

Returning to the allegory of the human body, we can glean further understanding as it applies to our function in the body: If a part, or member, of our body is not functioning properly, it is either *malfunctioning* or *not functioning at all*. A member at rest is functioning properly unless it is resting at a time it is being called upon to work. In this case, it is malfunctioning! Either our members are functioning properly, functioning improperly (malfunctioning), or not functioning at all. There are no other alternatives!

The third alternative is known medically as *paralysis*. If our heart malfunctions or ceases to function we have a heart attack. The result is either severe restriction and retardation, or death.

If any member of our body abandons its proper function, our body becomes diseased, whether that member is a vital organ or a simple limb. It should be immediately obvious to us that a diseased or handicapped body is incomplete and cannot grow to completeness until the proper function of the crippled part is restored. This is true first because of the immediate lack of that member’s function and second, because the whole body must divert its energy and resources away from growth: the remaining members must make up for the lack of the crippled member. When two legs abandon their proper function for

whatever reason, the arms are forced to compromise their proper function to operate a wheelchair or manipulate crutches.

In our physical body, every member has either a positive or a negative effect on the whole body; *it cannot have a neutral effect*. This applies with equal force to the body of Christ. For a member to malfunction, or be paralyzed, harms the Church. It has a distinctly negative effect! The only way to have a positive effect on the body of Christ, is for each member to find its proper place and function in it.

2 Corinthians 14 exhorts that all we do should be to build up the body of Christ. We are to do every thing we can to cause it to grow! All of Paul's energy went toward this goal (Col. 1:28, 29). That is where all of our energy should go (Eph. 4:16). Whenever we are not functioning properly, we defeat the very purpose for which God has called us: we hinder Christ's body from growing into the fullness of the stature of Christ (Rom. 8:28-30).

Importance or Prominence?

Every one of us is an important part of the body of Christ, and our function is absolutely necessary to the health, well-being and completeness of the Church. But importance is not the same as prominence. The nose is a prominent part of our body; the liver isn't. But who can deny the vital importance of the liver?

Satan continually incites our fleshly ambition, our carnal desire for prominence or preeminence. This fleshly ambition is a diabolical perversion of an honest and healthy desire for a feeling of importance and usefulness to others. This God ordained desire can be satisfied only as we function faithfully as the member God has called us to be.

We can evaluate our feelings of importance using the standards of love, faith, and growth. If our dominant aim is the advancement and growth of the whole Church, and its individual members, we are serving in love. We can also ask, "Is my activity motivated by a desire to be known, to have power over people (i.e. "lord it over them"), to advance my own personal position?" To the degree that it is, we are not motivated by love and the desire to realize our rightful place of importance, but rather by a perverse desire for preeminence.

If my function is the result of striving, if I'm uptight about my function, and if I lack confidence in God's enablement, my functioning is not of faith and my feeling of importance is false. If faith doesn't well up in those who hear me, and if fruit isn't born through my function as a member of the body, it lacks faith.

Growth and Development

We need to consider growth and maturity as we reflect on our proper function in Christ's body: Am I evaluating my ministry (service, function) in the body of Christ based upon a realistic appraisal of my development in Christ?

We begin our life in the natural realm as babies. Why should we consider it will be any different spiritually? None of us is born physically mature. *It is the same spiritually.* Spiritual growth takes time and is often painful. Since we are all to function properly and this function has a part in making us grow maturity isn't required to begin functioning properly.

Our difficulty in grasping this often comes from confusing our proper function with our apparent present contribution to the body. A baby isn't going to be able to contribute as much to the Church's growth as a mature person serving as an elder. A two year-old can't carry as much weight as a twenty-year old. A five-year-old girl cannot bear children. A boy of seven years cannot run the affairs of state. However, each of these can function properly in their respective places and roles in the home and society.

Many of us have the false idea that we are qualified to contribute major ministry in the assembly because we are a member of the body, without regard to our "spiritual age." This is not true. The New Testament teaches that the Church only looks to seasoned and mature elders for substantial ministry in matters of church government. The younger men ("neophytes" or novices) were not allowed such a place of responsibility in the Church until later in their lives (1 Timothy 3:6).

Because we aren't all mature or "seasoned" doesn't mean that we don't all have a valuable contribution to make to the life and growth of the body. But just as in the natural realm where leaders and great men of today were yesterday's unable children, so it is in the spiritual realm! Just as certainly as a journeyman carpenter qualifies only after years of apprenticeship, so it is in the Church.

Now the question arises, “What is all of this talk about proper functioning, and grace to minister having been given to all if it is only possible for those who are mature?” Prominent ministry such as teaching, preaching, and government constitutes only a small percentage of the body’s functions. Think of where your body would be if only the heart, brain, and liver functioned properly. Again, can a fourth grader function as fully in his position as a university student does in his? Of course he can! Can an infant function as well in his place of maturity, as an astute businessman does in his? Why certainly!

For some members of the body, the proper function at a given time may be to be passive and receive ministry without making any apparent contribution. For a young member it is to do all he can to grow. As a newborn babe it is to desire the milk of God’s Word. For him to do anything else at that stage in his growth would be for him to malfunction. In the case of the infant member of Christ’s body, his obligation is to be nurtured, cared for, and grow. By doing so, he is doing his utmost to advance the growth and health of the whole body.

Hence, one of the most important issues for each of the members of Jesus’ many-membered body to settle is each one’s proper relationship to the body of Christ. This assures his proper position for growth and service. This is what it means to be properly “fitted” to the “joints” which supply life and hold things together (See Eph. 4:16).

Commitment

Two principles make it quite easy to hold a “true course” in finding your proper position in the body: 1) Spiritual ‘supply and demand,’ 2) submission to one another (Eph. 5:21). The physical body is so constructed it knows when it is hungry and the most reliable places to look for food. Again, the same is true in the spiritual body: the body of Christ makes demands for its sustenance on reliable sources of ‘nourishment.’ The body satisfies its thirst from those in whom it finds wells of living water continually flowing. It relies on the stronger members for support during times of special need. If you are functioning properly in your right place in the body of Christ, you’ll not go unnoticed or “unused.” If you aren’t however, it is likely you will feel that nobody pays any serious attention to your contributions.

We never have to strive to enter our place of service by our own fleshly efforts. God has already put us there. The only thing we have to do is to

maintain proper fellowship *with* other members of the body. We should always be sure we are correctly submitted to the other members of the body (Eph. 5:21)

To function properly, the arm must remain closely joined to the shoulder *and* the hand.

If we want God to use us effectively, then we must maintain a close and committed relationship to the body of Christ. If we are going to have a positive, rather than a negative effect of the body, we must be involved in its life. Because we are God's own purchased possession, *we have forever forfeited our right to noninvolvement.*

Attendance at the regular, appointed gatherings of the body of Christ is basic to this commitment to Jesus Christ and His body. It is foolish for us to talk about love, vision, and concern for the body if we seldom show up at its times of meeting. The hand isn't of any benefit to the body if it is lying on a table somewhere, dismembered from the body. The same applies to Christians. True and honest commitment will manifest itself, without fail, by involvement. Dr. Howard Ervin once said, "Total commitment inevitably predicates involvement!" The more committed a person is to Jesus, the more he will be available to be involved in the Church's life.

What's the Result?

In discussing the idea of up building the body, Paul says, "speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the Head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love" (Eph. 4:15,16).

When we individually commit ourselves with renewed zeal to see these truths realized in the Church's experience, we will see Christ's church transformed from a "pile of stones" into "living stones, being built up into a spiritual house." Our spiritual unity and completeness in Christ will be manifested through "the temple of the living God," the "one body with many members." The sleeping giant, previously paralyzed by its disjointedness will stand up in power, and "the Lord shall roar out of Zion!" May God grant us common vision to see we can no longer afford the luxury of "being at ease in Zion." For "YOU are Christ's body and individually members of it."

