

The Body Language of an Unhealthy Church

1 Corinthians 12:14-25

June 19 & 20, 2010
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It is good to get back to 1 Corinthians after taking the opportunity 1 Corinthians 12 provides to teach on the Holy Spirit. I hope the messages were helpful to you. They were to me.

Let's just remind ourselves of the big picture at Corinth. Corinth was a major city of its day. It was rich. Pagan. Obsessed with sex and money. It had huge social diversity with the people tensions that creates. The Apostle Paul started the church and ministered there for a year and a half. He is now writing back to them and addressing concerns and questions in the church. They include divisions over favorite church leaders, lawsuits among Christians, Christian liberty, the Lord's Supper, and in chapters 12-14, spiritual gifts. This was a church that would allow just about anything to divide them. The so-what here is that Christ died to form all believers into one Church. The Holy Spirit's baptism relocated us into this one holy Church (12:13). It is our responsibility to reflect relationally what is true spiritually.

Paul wants the Corinthian Christians to understand their oneness in a way that allows them to celebrate the diversity of people, races, perspectives, and gifts yet be one in heart and purpose and love.

Verses 14-27 are an extended illustration in which Paul compares the Church to the human body. Good illustrations are ones everyone can relate to. I have done exhaustive studies of the ancient world; I have carefully examined all the evidence and I can say definitively that every person who lived in the first century, had a body, just like us. We can all relate to body illustrations.

The core concept is repeated in verses 12, 14, 20, and 27. *For the body does not consist of one member but of many.* (Verse 14) There is one body with many members or parts. Plurality in unity. Diversity in harmony. The Church is like the body. Paul's illustration is an imaginary conversation of what body parts in an unhealthy body would say to each other; how they would treat each other, when it's unhealthy.

This is about as close to a humorous illustration as you will find from the Apostle Paul. Talking body parts. Jesus had some humorous illustrations (logs hanging out of eyes and camels going through the eyes of needles) but for Paul, this is about as funny as he gets, so let's enjoy it. The attitudes here are easily described as an inferiority complex and a superiority complex.

Gift Inferiority Complex – My Gift (and I) aren't that Important! (12:15-16)

If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. (Verse 15)

This is not hard to imagine, is it? If your foot could really communicate how it feels about its role compared to others, the foot would naturally see the hand as an improved version of itself.

Why am I the foot? Why do I bear the weight of this whole body? And what do I get for that? They cover me up! Do they know how hot it is in this shoe? Do they know what

sweat smells like in here? I'm dying down here! And look at the hand – all nicely ventilated. His nails are cut twice as often as mine. He is washed multiple times a day. They make scented creams for him for goodness sake! And how nice would it be to have an opposing thumb? Look what he can do with that thumb! Hold. Grab. Type. Play. Why didn't I get the opposable thumb? I can't compete with that. No wonder people shake hands and not feet. I think the real purpose of shoes is to hide me. I'm an embarrassment to the body. I'm not important around here – not like the hand!

And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. (Verse 16)

The ear could make a similar self-assessment:

My amazing functions are hidden in the head. Nobody notices me. If they do notice me it's because these lobes stick out too much. I never get compliments – not like the eye. When have you ever heard someone say, "What beautiful ears you have"? No, it's always, "What beautiful eyes you have." Even kids are taught to ignore me. "Look the person in the eye," they say. "Why the eye?" The eye can't hear anything, yet people want to meet 'eye to eye.' It's never ear to ear. I don't really matter around here – not like the eye!

Feet wishing they were hands. Ears wishing they were eyes. That is a Gift Inferiority Complex. The analogy is to gifts that are less public or noticeable – perhaps service or hospitality instead of teaching and leadership.

Paul's response is that just because we assess ourselves this way doesn't mean we aren't a part of the body. The foot and ear still belong to the body. The second thing he says is in verse 17, *If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell?*

The ear is seriously underestimating its importance. If everyone got to choose themselves, the whole body could end up an eye. That would be a problem because there would be no hearing. A deaf body is a problem. A footless body is a problem. Effectively, when we think our gift and our role is unimportant and allow that to diminish our service and enthusiasm, it disables the Church as a whole.

The real issue with this is in verse 18: *But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.* What we are really doing is underestimating the importance of the role and gift God gave to us. Why do each of us have the spiritual gifts we do? God's choice. Like salvation, God's spiritual gifts for service in the Church are from His grace and according to His wisdom. *As he chose!* When we are jealous of someone else's gift, we are questioning God's wisdom. When we depreciate our own gift, we question His goodness to us. *Why did she get that gift? Envy. Why didn't I get that gift? Jealousy. If God was good, He wouldn't have given me this gift! Blasphemy.* Verse 18, *God arranged the members in the body, each one of them [including you], as he chose.*

Let's take a moment and ask ourselves, Do I have a Gift Inferiority Complex? Am I thankful for my gifting and my role in the body? Am I jealous of someone else? Can I trust God's wisdom in gifting me the way He did enough for me to use my gift faithfully, enthusiastically, and in harmony with the rest of the body?

Gift Superiority Complex – You and Your Gift aren't That Important! (12:20-21)

As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." (Verses 20-21)

If the danger of less noticeable gifts is to underestimate their value, the danger of those with noticeable gifts is to overestimate their own worth. The picture here is of an eye saying to the hand, *I don't really need you*. Does the eye need the hand? The hand does all sorts of things that the eye, in its self-pride, doesn't appreciate. The hand feeds the body. The hand protects the body from injury. The hand even serves the eye itself, by wiping it, washing it, and shading it. The eye really needs the hand.

And the head really needs the feet. What happens to the head if the feet aren't there? The head falls to the ground. The eye needs the hand. The head needs the feet.

It seems that the members of a certain body were angry with the stomach because all it did was consume food. Simply put, he did not work as hard as they did. The legs complained about all the walking they did in search for food. The hands spoke of the tiresome job of meal preparation. The eyes were upset because all they did was look for food to satisfy the demands of that lazy stomach. The teeth were worn out with constant chewing, and the throat was weary from swallowing. So they went on strike. After some days, however, the legs were too weak to rise. The hands had no strength, and the eyes were droopy. The stomach encouraged them to do their job of getting him food so they would all feel strong again. At first they refused... but they finally all agreed. Soon they found their strength renewed as they began to work together for the good of all.

What was likely going on at Corinth was that they were obsessed with the more spectacular gifts; chapter 14 would suggest speaking in tongues primarily. Those without the gift wish they had it and those with the gift were proud they had it. Remember, gifts of the Spirit are not a sign of spiritual maturity, the fruit of the Spirit is. Our flesh loves nothing more than a little rivalry. How easy it is for relationships in the Church and the Church as a whole to be ripped apart by the green eye of envy and a lack of appreciation for God's gifts in each other.

The Cure - Every part (person and gift) is vitally important

Paul continues the body illustration by showing that the less public gifts are important.

On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it... (Verses 22-24)

Our bodies have obvious parts and less obvious parts. Strong parts and delicate parts. Parts that are big, parts that are small. It would be a serious mistake to say that if something is little or delicate, it's not that important. Ask anyone who has ever had a slipped disc, hernia, vertigo, leaky heart valve, sciatic nerve issue, or a hemorrhoid. Little parts, working right, are really important.

I'm living my own illustration. Last October I was playing open gym basketball for the first time of the season. My knee started hurting. I've never had a knee injury or knee problem at all. I stopped. I limped to my car. I could hardly walk in the morning. I rested it for three

months. I went and played again. This time it hurt even worse. I've been waiting for it to heal because a man of my youthfulness doesn't get hurt and expects to heal quickly. It wasn't healing so I finally went to an orthopedic doctor and found out that I have a torn medial meniscus. How many of us even know what that is? It's the little tissue in the knee. It's thin. Small. Seemingly insignificant. Mine is torn. That's a big problem.

I'm having surgery on it in July to fix it. I won't be normal for a couple months! And it's all because a little piece of tissue is not doing what it's supposed to do! I have a whole new appreciation for how important this little piece of tissue in my knee is. I am reminded with every step I take that small parts are incredible important.

With Apostolic discretion, Paul points out another reality. Our less "presentable" parts we give special honor to by carefully covering them. Why do we clothe the body parts we do? Have you ever in your life walked out the door and forgotten this special honor? The clothing shows their importance. They are given an honor we don't to give to our ears and hands, and legs. All parts of the human body are important. We wouldn't want to be without any of them. They all belong.

But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. (Verses 24-25)

This is where this whole illustration is going. The purpose statement (an *ina* clause in the Greek) is, *That there may be no division in the body.* A divided body is a diseased body. A healthy body values all its parts and cares for them. *"But that the members might have the same care for one another."* (Verse 25)

One of the tragic human diseases of history is leprosy. Jesus regularly came across it and often healed it. Leprosy is a disease where body parts, particularly the extremities, can no longer be felt. Hands. Feet. Ears. Nose. The nerve endings no longer feel that part of the body. The body is numb to sensation. It doesn't feel warmth. It doesn't feel cold. It doesn't feel pain. It doesn't "feel" that part anymore. That part doesn't feel like it's connected.

A healthy body senses every pain every part feels. So if you are hammering a nail and you slam the hammer on your finger, the body doesn't ignore it. *Stupid finger, why were you in the way of the hammer?* The body instantly comes to its aid. The reflex of a healthy body is to "have the same care for one another" (Verse 25).

This is a healthy body and this is a healthy church. Some member is hurting, in a trial, experiencing pain. In a leprous church, their pain is not felt and so the thought is, *If it doesn't impact my life then I won't feel compassion, sympathy, the need to reach out, support, or help.*

We are the body of Christ. We are in this together. We are all vital to the body. There isn't one person here that is unimportant. There isn't one gift here that isn't needed. The more we realize how much we need each other, the stronger and healthier we will be. The lifeblood of any church is love. This is what has to be circulating to all the body parts. It is no wonder that just verses from here, Paul famously writes,

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures

all things. Love never ends. (1 Corinthians 13:4-8) Love is the blood of the body. It keeps spiritual nutrients and warmth flowing throughout the body. This is a healthy church.

Two Applications to Avoid Spiritual Leprosy

Get connected to a local church enough to “feel”

You can know if you are sufficiently connected to the church if you feel the joys, sorrows, and pains of the body. Sometimes people make the argument that it's not important to be a part of a local church. Often those people had some bad experience in the past and so their theology veers away from the importance of the local church. The safe way is to isolate; that way you don't have to feel pain. I wonder how many people in Northwest Indiana would profess Jesus as Savior but have resolved in their hearts to never be spiritually connected to a church again.

That is spiritual leprosy. It might seem nice not to feel pain, but without connection to the body, it damages the body or the body parts. Are you sufficiently into the body life of this local church? When needs are shared, are you moved by them? When joys are shared, do you rejoice in them?

What's the solution? Value the church as people bought with the precious blood of Christ. They are imperfect and dysfunctional, kind of like your body, yet you value it, clothe it, wash it, and care for it. What does valuing the local church look like? Committing yourself to it and the people. Valuing it with indicators like service, time, prayer, ministry and giving.

This is where merely attending the weekend services falls so seriously short of real Christianity. Real Christianity is lived in community with other Christians with whom we relationally identify and for whom we care (Verse 25). This is spiritual. Relational. Body life. Get connected enough to “feel” the life of the body by serving here and using your gift. Be loving here by connecting with others through ministry or small group or prayer group or just reaching out to others. Be life-giving here with an attitude of encouragement, love, and kindness. Remember, as we said last week, the Church is God's recreating of humanity as He created us to be; faith lived in community.

Get connected enough to be “felt”

Right now, if there was a vote in my body, most of my body parts would prefer that my right knee wasn't a part of the body anymore. However, my knee is clearly a part of my body because its problem is felt throughout my body. All the parts in my body are aware of the issue in my knee.

Being a part of the church isn't just about ministering to others, it is also about the joy of being loved and cared for as well. Your joys are rejoiced in by others. Your pain is felt by others. Your needs are met by others.

Are you connected enough to the church for other Christians to know who you are? Do they appreciate you? Care for you? This requires engagement by all of us. Let me encourage you to get into the body life, to be “felt” by the church. A healthy church is plurality in unity. Many, yet one. Love for God and for one another.

We want Bethel Church to increasingly be that. This requires messages like this to not only be heard, but applied. How about you? I mean, you, the one right now thinking, *I'm not important or I'm not that needed.* You have a Gift Inferiority Complex. And I mean you who

are thinking, *Do they realize how gifted I am? I'm too good for this group.* You've got a Gift Superiority Complex.

We need you. You need us. Together we are the body of Christ.

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