

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Body Life I Corinthians 12:14-26

Sometimes I hear remarks like, "it is difficult to break into the inner circle at HBF" or "This church has so many awesome Bible teachers and seminary students which makes me feel so insignificant, unimportant and estranged from the group," or "How can a little person like me be used at HBF?" or "How can I find personal relationships and deeper fellowship at HBF?" These statements are made only by a few and could be said about many other churches as well; nevertheless, they are said at times about HBF, and it should concern all of us.

There is a solution to these problems. It is found in a proper understanding of what a biblical local church really is. The local church is to function like the human body. When a church is not functioning like a body, we can expect a lack of fellowship, feelings of alienation and a sensing of one's insignificance to the local church which is supposed to be a reflection of the universal body of Christ.

The Corinthian church did not understand the local church was to function like a human body. The Apostle Paul told them the church is a spiritual body of Christ. The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ (I Cor. 12:12). He also told them they got into this body by the baptism of the Holy Spirit which united them to and identified them with the person of Christ, forming the spiritual body of Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body -- whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink (I Cor. 12:13). Now Christians not only share life with Christ but they also share Christ's life with all other Christians. Paul explained to these Corinthians that every true Christian has at least one spiritual gift and these gifts are to be used for the common good of the church.

ISSUE IN BODY LIFE 12:14

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. The church is a living organism as is the human body. There are many members but each one is necessary to the life and well-being of all. The loss of any one member would be a mutilation of the body. God designed it so there would be diversity in the church. No one member is to be equated with the body, and it takes many members to make up one body. Diversity in the body is not accidental but planned. Members are persons who are gifted by God to do the work of the ministry. God does not expect everyone to have the gift of evangelism, but He does expect all to evangelize. Not all have the special gift of faith, but all are to exercise faith. There are some who have the special gift of helps but all are to help. God has gifted people in the church to stir the whole church to deeper commitment to Christ.

INSIGNIFICANT MEMBERS OF THE BODY EXHORTED 12:15-20

If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," It would not for that reason cease to be 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 cease to be part of the body. Paul addresses this section to the lesser members in the body. Behind these words, we can feel the grumbling on the part of the lesser members. By lesser members, I mean those who have lesser gifts. The Corinthian Christians had a particular problem because they were exalting the spectacular gifts like tongues and healing above all other spiritual gifts. Those who displayed the spectacular gifts were thought of as more spiritual. Those who thought themselves more spiritual had an independent spirit and a superiority attitude brought on by pride which caused atrophy and paralysis in that local church. Some of the less gifted members in the church wondered whether they had a right to exist or could make a real contribution to the church, seeing there were so many with wonderful and spectacular gifts. They felt themselves very inadequate, very insufficient and very inferior. This led to envy and discontent. Perhaps some were not happy because of the nature of their gift; that is, they moaned because they had the gift of helps and not evangelism, or the gift of giving rather than the gift of teacher, or the gift of mercy rather than prophet. Perhaps others complained over the quality of their gift. They had the gift of teaching but not to the degree of another brother or sister, so they became discontented. Perhaps there were some who were unhappy about their position in the church -- they were deacons and not elders, or Sunday school teachers and not deacons.

Paul's point is that there are no insignificant members of the body. What he teaching is that if we think of ourselves as a member of the church, the body of Christ, and we say to ourselves, "Because I can't stand up and preach or teach or lead, there is really nothing I can do in the body of Christ," we are deceiving ourselves. Every one of us is part of the body, each has at least one spiritual gift, and all of us are important to the total functioning of the church.

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 cease to be part of the body. What a ridiculous body if everybody did the same thing. In the church, God has gifted each person to get the work of the ministry done. There are many jobs to be done in the church and God has gifted the people to do these jobs. No member of the body can perform the function of another member. Each person is uniquely gifted and absolutely necessary to the normal functioning of the body. if everyone were evangelists, who would do the helping? If everyone were pastor-teachers, who would show mercy? if everyone were on the front line as missionaries, who would do the praying and giving behind the lines?

Rather than build up community out of diversity, we often tend to let each sub-group form its own unit and grow in isolation from other natural groupings. The community which is alive to the Spirit is committed, by Scripture, to the costly struggle of living out the reconciliation of all men to one another and to God, by uniting black and white, intellectual and action-oriented businessmen, new believer and mature disciple, Jew and Gentile, young and old, male and female, single and married.

There are many other, more subtle, distinctives which we can easily and unconsciously stifle, to the point where the body has effectively lost several limbs by social cultural or intellectual amputation. For example, a local church needs both the traditional and the avant-garde; those on the political right, left and center; those who lean different ways over "charismatic renewal" More particularly, the distinctive insights and priorities of evangelist, prophet pastor and teacher all need to be held together and not reduced to the lowest common denominator. We differ from one another and only God, who made us different, can hold us together (David Prior, I Corinthians).

Scripturally the church is to model heterogeneous groupings that cause the world to marvel at our unity within diversity. A church should be a place where people gather together and get along with each other who have no human reason to do so. The Bible does not teach homogeneous groupings of people (upper, middle and lower classes, Spanish, Jewish and African-American, Chinese, Greek and Japanese churches) but heterogeneous groupings of people.

But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. The Christian's placement in the body of Christ, the church, is by divine appointment. God has given each one of us our particular gifts and no one else in the whole world can do what we can for God. The eye does not decide for itself that it is going to see; it is given the ability by God to see. The ear does not develop its own ability to hear but was given that ability by God. So his that God gives the ability and position to each member in the body. Every member is in the body by the sovereign appointment and design of God.

The implications of this verse are clear. For a Christian to be envious of the ability or position of another Christian is to resist the will of God for his life. To be discontented with our gift or to be envious of another gift is to stand against the will of God. Submission to the will of God is recognizing our position in the body of Christ and knowing what God has spiritually equipped us to do, and then doing it, yielding to the Lordship of Christ. We are what we are in spiritual gifts and we should not try to be something God never intended us to be.

All the gifts we need at HBF are here right now. God may give other gifts in the future but all we need to function are here at this very hour. We can carry out this ministry effectively, but we must all put our spiritual gifts to work. Something is wrong when we have to plead and beg people to get involved in the ministry.

If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. No matter how important any one member may be, there can be no body formed from that one member alone. It takes all the members to make up one body. This ought to settle forever the issue of insignificance and inferiority. No Christian can say there is no place for me in the church. There most certainly is a place and God designed it that way.

Envy and discontent over spiritual gifts will lead to a critical spirit and an inferiority complex. The only way to overcome these feelings is to understand that you alone can fill a place in the church that no one else can, and you are important to God and the smooth functioning of the church.

INDEPENDENT MEMBERS OF THE BODY EXHORTED 12:21-25

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" The Apostle Paul now addresses the greater gifted members in the body. The eye is more important than the hand, and the head more important than the feet. Yet the eye needs the hand and the head needs the feet. Those in the Corinthian church who had greater gifts thought themselves superior to those who had the lesser gifts. Those with the up-front and spectacular gifts looked down their noses at those with lesser gifts. This attitude produced a very independent spirit, causing those with the greater gifts to get the idea they did not need the rest of the body, they could function on their own; they could do their own thing; they could get on in the ministry without others helping them. God hates a spirit of pride and independence because this always produces an attitude of competitiveness and rivalry which leads to division in the local church.

What Paul says is that those with the greater gifts are actually dependent upon the lesser members. It is all the little gifts functioning properly which make the big gifts function effectively.

On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. The church cannot function properly without the lesser gifts. The tongue would be nothing without the lungs and larynx which are not seen or heard. These lesser and sometimes unseen spiritual gifts are absolutely necessary for the proper functioning of the church as a body. A little toe seems insignificant, but break it or stub it and the whole body is hurt. The lesser members are indispensable to the effective functioning of the body.

We doll up the parts of our body which are not too attractive by nature by wearing clothing which draws special attention to these parts. Those with the greater gifts are to honor those with the lesser gifts, drawing attention to their importance for the effective functioning at the church. We are to honor those Christians with the gift of helps for instance those with an ability to know what needs to be done. Food needs to be served, chairs need to be set up, a house needs to be cleaned. If we reason, "Those with the gift of helps are nice to have around but they are not nearly as necessary as those with the flashy gifts like teaching and evangelism," we are not giving these folks the lesser gifts honor. If we did not have the gift of helps in the local church, we soon would not be able to preach and teach effectively.

But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, In God eyes, the person with the gift of helps or mercy or administration is just as honorable as those who are healers, pastor-teachers or evangelists.

So that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. God hates division in the church, and the way to avoid division is to get every member in the church to use his or her spiritual gift, giving honor to those who have the lesser spiritual gifts so they will feel wanted, needed and useful. When the body is functioning properly, there is genuine care and concern in the church. That will not be concern just for the wealthy and powerful or the elders and deacons,

but for all in the church. There will be concern for the new visitors as well as for the established members.

INTERDEPENDENCE OF MEMBERS WITHIN THE BODY 12:26

If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; When any member of the body suffers because he is not using his spiritual gift in the body, the whole church suffers. One troubled center of pain in the human body affects the entire body. When one member suffers in any way, it is essential for the body to feel the pain together. This is one of the basic reasons HBF has a sharing time during the service. It gives an opportunity for those in the body to share spiritual pain so we can all share it together. This sharing can be done in a small home group, but it is more effective in the large group because then the whole body sends its healing qualities to heal the one source of pain.

When we fail to use our gifts the whole church suffers. When we gossip or have a critical spirit, the whole body is affected. When we withhold our monies because we are not happy about something in the church, this hurts the whole body. If we have a heart for missions but not for Covenant Christian School, this affects the whole church. What we do or don't do affects the whole body. You would think it hilarious if you saw someone walking down the street slapping himself in the face. Yet Christians are constantly slapping other Christians in the body by neglect, slander, criticism and antagonism or whatever.

If one part is honored every part rejoices with it. If God is blessing someone in a big way in the use of his spiritual gift, this should cause the whole church to rejoice. It God chooses in His sovereignty to bless some families more than others, we should all rejoice. Someone has said, "It is much easier to suffer with those who are suffering than to rejoice with those who are rejoicing."

What is Paul's point? We are not islands. We are not Lone Ranger Christians. The Bible speaks of individuality but not individualism. We are all dependent and interdependent on one another. God hates pride and an independent spirit. When we are submitted to the Lordship of Christ and using our spiritual gifts for the common good, we are blessing the body, and when we are not, we are causing the body to suffer. This is also true of how brothers and sisters in other denominations and parachurch groups. They need us and we need them and this will become even more evident when persecution comes to Christians in our country.

CONCLUSION

As pastor of HBF, I long for the time when we will not only be known for our good Bible teaching but also for our even better body life. I long for that time when we will experience as a group the life and vitality of Christ in wonderful and unique ways. We must pray and work to make sure every member has a sense of belonging and contributing to the common good in this body of believers. My desire and prayer is that we will be like the early New Testament church.

They dwell in their own countries but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do others; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They share a common table but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws their lives. They love all, and are persecuted by all. They are poor, yet they make many rich; they are completely destitute, and yet they enjoy complete abundance. They are reviled, and yet they bless. When they do good they are punished as evildoers; undergoing punishment, they rejoice because they are brought to life (Epistle to Diognetus -- AD 130)

If you are without Christ, I want to remind you that just because you attend church or are a member of a local church does not necessarily make you a member of Christ's body, the universal church. Only those who realize they are sinners, separated from God and headed for judgment will flee to Christ for cleansing. Only those who have need for forgiveness will trust Christ as Savior. Only those who acknowledge Christ as Lord, giving Him the right to rule in their lives, shall be brought into the invisible, universal church which is made up of all true believers in Christ. Have you in simple faith turned to Christ and received Him as your Savior and Lord? If you have not, why not do it today, for the Bible says, "But as many as received him to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name (John 1:12).