

Thoughts From Other Minds:

This mutual care, says Paul, is also intrinsic to the body: this is the way God has composed (= 'adjusted') the body. The Greek word, *synekerasen*, has the basic meaning of mixing different parts together with a specific purpose in mind, i.e. to produce mutual support and interdependence. ... God wants the members of a local church to recognize how much they depend on one another, because that is an incentive to remove discord (*schisma*) and to deepen true concern.

Paul underlines this in two ways. First, we pay particular attention to the less presentable parts of our physical bodies; we should be similarly ready to give special care to 'weaker' brothers and sisters, those who might feel readily dispensable but are in fact vital to the health of the body. Secondly, this care is to be expressed both by 'rejoicing with those who rejoice' and by 'weeping with those who weep'. Some Christians find more difficulty with the former than with the latter: it requires the grace of true humility to be genuinely glad when another is being blessed, used and praised. When one member suffers in any way, it is essential for the body to feel the pain together. ...

Throughout the world today, the way the Christian community faces and uses suffering is crucial to the integrity of its testimony. In the West we have become so accustomed to finding escape routes from pain of all kinds that we can learn deep lessons from our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world, for whom suffering is normal and inevitable. We learn this in the relatively manageable fellowship of a local church, especially in a smaller microcosm of the church meeting regularly in a home. Care is shown by entering into the joys and sorrows of other members of the body. That is automatic with our physical bodies, as a toothache or a septic toe will soon indicate. When there are no such sensations, there is something seriously wrong. Do we know one another well enough in our local churches to be able to rejoice or to suffer at appropriate occasions?

As the body of Christ operates in this way, so the individual members will find their real needs met. The need for security is met in the assurance that 'I belong to the body'. The need for identity is met in recognizing and working at the fact that 'I have a distinctive contribution to bring to the body'. The need for a proper sense of responsibility is met by assuming concern for others in the body: 'I need you; I feel with you; I rejoice with you.' So each individual grows as a person and as a Christian in direct relation to his finding his place as a member of the body. The Scriptures speak of individuality, not of individualism. The latter phenomenon is a perversion of our calling in Christ. It plagues the church of God, spoiling its witness and shrivelling individuals. This discovery of our individuality within the life of the Christian community ... is a radical alternative both to the tyranny of totalitarianism and to the empty dreams of personal fulfilment through individualism.

David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians*, pp. 215-16

Camperdown Noorat Terang Presbyterian Charge

11 September 2016

Sermon: "Life in the body # 4 –"

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:1-31a

Sermon Notes

Introduction: In our 'one another' studies our overarching theme has been 'life in the body', living in love together as a community of Christian believers, starting from our August Communion Sunday text (Jn 14:12) and that saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ unites us to him as our head and to each other as members of his body.

We have been asking 'what does it mean to live together 'in the body' loving each other as our Lord loved us?' We have seen from Romans 12 and 15 that it means humility towards each other (cf. also 1 Pet 5:5); and humility is expressed in our serving one another, by having the same serving mind as Jesus had for us.

Today we come to another 'one another' that relates to Christian service. The apostle Paul's answer to the Corinthians question 'concerning spiritual gifts' (1 Cor 12:1) runs through chs. 12-14, so we are not attempting to cover it in detail. Rather, we are looking at it as a 'one another' passage, approaching it from 12:24-25.

1. No division in the body

The apostle is again using body language to explain the way things are and ought to be in the church, in our congregation, in our charge—and his great concern is that there should be 'no division in the body', no dissention, no quarrelling, no breakdown in relationships, and especially such division over spiritual gifts.

There was such division in the church in Corinth, for they thought about such gifts as more for show than for service, for showing off, rather than for the common good, and so the gift they prized was tongues, the ability to speak in languages the speakers hadn't learned and often didn't understand.

This gift is a source of division today, with some saying it has ceased and others saying that if we don't speak in tongues we are not converted. But the apostle teaches that like the other gifts, it was given to some, but not to all (1 Cor 12:30) - and so it's not true to say that we are not real Christians unless we speak in tongues.

Some of the Corinthians thought that all should speak in tongues, or that those who did were superior to those who did not, for the apostle proves that diversity of gifts is perfectly consistent with our unity in Christ. The same Spirit by whom we say 'Jesus is Lord' gives a variety of gifts for the common good (vs. 1-2, 7-11).

These varied gifts are all from the same Spirit and for one purpose; not showing off or for putting others down, but 'for the common good'; we cannot serve without such gifts and the empowering the Spirit gives, and we are to use our varied gifts to serve one another (cf. also 1 Peter 4:10-11).

We could suppose that because the Spirit apportions spiritual gifts ‘as he wills’ that we have no ‘say’ in the gifts—and we could suppose that because all the gifts are for the common good they are of equal value—but the apostle commands ‘but earnestly desire the higher gifts (12:31a) especially prophecy (14:1).

‘Prophecy’ means not the ability to predict the future, but to interpret the scripture and apply it to present needs. The Corinthians were infatuated with the spectacular speaking gift of tongues—but the value of a gift is in its usefulness in building others up; intelligibility is of more value than volubility (1 Cor 14:2-5).

The most valuable service we can render to another is to explain the scriptures and to show who they meet his or her particular need then. The prophets weren’t just preachers—they also spoke God’s word to people privately—as Jeremiah spoke privately with king Zedekiah (Jer 38:14-28).

Every Christian should want to be able to explain and apply the scriptures, both to bring outsiders into Christ’s kingdom, and to build up their fellow believers in the faith. And there are other useful gifts; we are to ‘earnestly desire the spiritual gifts’; ask yourself, ‘What gift would I find useful in serving Christ?’ - and pray for it!

2. Having the same care for one another

Diversity of gifts is not opposed to unity within the church, for the different gifts are from the same Spirit, as he wills, and because the church is a body, and needs these diverse gifts to be and to function as a body (vs. 12-14). There is a likeness between our bodies and the church; the less glamorous parts are part of the body!

There is interdependence in a body; the various parts of a body need each other (v. 21); the eye cannot manage without hands; the head cannot manage without the feet; we may think of ourselves as eyes and as heads, and others as feet and hands and as less important—but we need them and they need us.

The parts of the body that are weaker (‘less noble’) are indispensable, and the parts of the body regarded as less honourable are honoured and treated with greater modesty; the head is noble, and needs no special treatment, but other parts are less noble—and we honour them by dressing them in clothes! (vs. 22-23).

This is no accident; rather, this is the way God has composed the body, so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. (vs. 24-25). The apostle has one eye on ‘the body’ and the other on the church; sin brought shame and the need for clothes; by these God set honour on the parts of our bodies that lack honour, and so there is mutual care in the body.

What is true of the body is also to be true of us as a church, a congregation of Christ’s people, for we ‘are the body of Christ, and individually members of it’ (v. 27). Our varying gifts are not to be a source of pride and envy and strife; there is to be mutual appreciation and care, and we are to earnestly desire the higher gifts, so as to serve each other better, while pursuing love, for giftedness without love is nothing.

My Notes:

Questions for Reflection:

1. What was wrong with the Corinthians’ attitude to spiritual gifts, and what was the effect of this in their ‘body life’ as a church? (1 Cor 12:24b-26).
2. Read and reflect on 1 Cor 12:12-26, identifying its paragraphs and flow of thought. What had the Corinthians not understood about spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:7-11; cf. also 1 Peter 4:10-11), and how does the apostle Paul’s teaching address these issues?
3. What does the apostle mean by the command ‘earnestly desire the higher gifts’? (1 Cor 12:30b) In context, which is the lower gift and which is the higher gift, and why is one lower and the other higher? (cf. also 1 Cor 14:1).
4. How does the teaching of this chapter correct the notion that it is necessary to speak in tongues to be a Christian, or that every Christian should speak in tongues? (cf. esp. 12:27-30a).
5. Chapter 13 is often read at weddings, as though it is a ‘stand alone’ discussion of love; read and reflect on it in its New Testament context. What criticism of the Corinthians is implied? How does it relate to spiritual gifts?