

THE BODY OF CHRIST

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1 Corinthians 12:12-31

INTRODUCTION

When we approach a piece of scripture--any piece of scripture, really--I believe that there are different modes that we should be reading it in. There is a question, first, of what the original author was saying to his original audience. In our case today, what is it that the Apostle Paul was saying to the church in Corinth 2000 years ago in this part of his first epistle to them? That isn't always a simple question to answer; there is a language barrier to overcome, and the number of English translations available to us today (about 900, according to one website) testify to the complexity of translating a thought expressed in 1st century Greek or Aramaic into modern day English. There is also a cultural barrier, since some of the customs familiar to both original author and original audience are foreign to us. We miss a lot of humour in the Bible because of this.

Still, figuring out what the original author had to say to the original audience is only one step in reading God's word. We also want to know what the Spirit of God is saying *through those very words* to the Church of Many Ages. Once we have a pretty good idea of what Paul was saying to the church in Corinth in the passage before us today, we still want to know what message God intends for all of his children. Often these two things are identical. For example, when the Psalmist writes, "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!" (Ps.103:1), he is presumably writing to a particular Hebrew audience at a point in time long ago, exhorting them to bless the LORD. Nevertheless I think it is very reasonable to suppose that the Spirit of God also uses those very words to exhort every member of the Church of Many Ages to bless the LORD with all of his or her soul. The original author's message for his original

audience is just the very same as God's message for all of his children. In other cases, however, these two modes of reading scripture can come apart. In 137:9 the psalmist writes: "Blessed is he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rock". He is expressing vengeful rage against the Babylonians who invaded Israel and reaching out in solidarity to fellow Israelites who may have had their own children taken from them by Babylon. But it is *not at all* reasonable to suppose that with these words God is pronouncing a blessing to the Church of Many Ages upon those who dash Babylonian children against a rock. The Bible requires more careful reading than that. In some cases, what a human author has to say to his human audience may have no relevance at all to what God is saying to the Church of Many Ages. For example, in chapter 16 and verse 5 of 1 Corinthians, Paul tells the Corinthian church that he will visit them after he goes through Macedonia. The message of the human author to the original human audience here is fairly clear, however I am not sure that God is saying anything particular to the Church of Many Ages through those words.

Finally even when we have come to some understanding of what the Spirit of God is saying *in general* to all Christians in all Ages in some passage of scripture, I think there is a third question of what God is saying to us here and now. The Holy Spirit of God is living and active, and he never stops revealing the heart of God to his children. Indeed, I believe that God is constantly revealing as much of himself as his children can bear to receive, and I think he will go on doing this for all eternity. Now we should not just assume that God has a special word for us here and now every time that scripture is read; it may be that what he says in general to the Church of Many Ages is sufficient for us. But if God does have a message more directed at our particular needs in this moment, let us not miss out on it for lack of attention. In these words of Paul in chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians, we may find, if we are prayerful and attentive, that God has such a message. If so, may we have ears to hear it.

CONTEXT

Before looking more closely at the passage I want to focus on today, we've got to understand some of the surrounding context. Corinth was a Greek city that Paul visited sometime around A.D. 50. He was the first to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with them, and he helped establish a local community of believers. We read about this in Acts chapter 18:

“After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, ³ and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. ⁴ Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

⁵ When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. ⁶ But when they opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.”

⁷ Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. ⁸ Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized.

⁹ One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. ¹⁰ For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.” ¹¹ So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.

¹² While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews of Corinth made a united attack on Paul and brought him to the place of judgment. ¹³ “This man,” they charged, “is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law.”

¹⁴ Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to them, “If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. ¹⁵ But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law—settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things.” ¹⁶ So he drove them off. ¹⁷ Then the crowd there

turned on Sosthenes the synagogue leader and beat him in front of the proconsul; and Gallio showed no concern whatever.”

One thing you’ll notice is that Paul’s visit created a lot of social and political turmoil. As was his custom, Paul went first to the Jewish synagogue to attempt to persuade the Jews that Jesus was the messiah and that they should accept him as Lord. When he faced opposition from some of the Jews, he went to the Gentiles and converted some of them. The church he began there had a mix of Greeks, Romans, and Jews, and it becomes evident that they had a very difficult time figuring out how to live in community with each other despite their very different backgrounds and customs.

Addressing the lack of unity is Paul primary purpose in writing the epistle we know as “1 Corinthians.” After a greeting and a prayer for them, Paul begins his letter in 1:10 by saying

“I appeal to you, brothers and sisters,^[a] in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. ¹¹ My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. ¹² What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas^[b]”; still another, “I follow Christ.”

Evidently, there were some pronounced cliques and factions within the Corinthian church, with some belonging to “Team Paul”, others to “Team Apollos” or “Team Cephas (Peter)”, and then others who, likely with some degree of snootiness, claimed to simply be on “Team Christ”. Being on Team Christ is great, but not when you use that to distinguish yourself from other believers in your midst. The disunity behind these different factions was a major problem that crops up in various ways throughout the book of 1 Corinthians. A few examples:

- In Chapter 5 Paul addresses a “fornicator” within the church. Apparently one member of the church was living with his father’s wife. It isn’t clear whether this woman is also the

man's birthmother, but in any case there is no doubt in Paul's mind that it is an instance of sexual immorality, one that wouldn't even be permitted by the heathen culture of the day. Paul's real concern, however, is that the church community as a whole is aware of and permissive of the situation. Indeed, they were "boastful" about it. Perhaps they had the idea that the freedom found in Christ from the shackles of the Law meant that they didn't need to be concerned about sin any longer. Nothing could be further from the truth! It is important not to miss Paul's real message here, however. This is not just about judging others or imposing one's views about sexual ethics on someone who doesn't share them. It is about willfully fostering enough concern for each other that you seek to protect them from the ravages of sin. The Corinthian church knew full well that one of their members was willfully engaging in a sinful relationship, and they did not seem to care. But it is the church's business to care for its members, and for their spiritual health even more so than in any other way. Paul advises them to 'hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh. (5:5)' We don't really know what that means but it sounds awful. But again, the purpose of doing so is not to set ourselves up with a holier-than-thou attitude. The purpose, according to Paul, is 'that his spirit may be saved on the Day of the Lord.' It is concern for this very man's well-being that is lacking in the Corinthian church, and Paul is much more disturbed about that lack of concern, than he is about the immoral decision itself.

- In Chapter 8 Paul addressed some concerns about eating meat offered to idols. In Corinth there were many religious groups and many gods and idols that citizens would offer sacrifices to. When one was offered a meal at a friend's house, or even when one purchased meat in the market, there was a very real possibility that the meat was from an animal offered in sacrifice to some false god. There was a concern among the Corinthian Christians, then, about whether it was permissible to eat this meat. Paul's direct answer is fairly straightforward; since idols are nothing and there are no gods other than God, meat offered in sacrifice to false idols is just meat, and there is nothing in principle sinful about eating it. However, Paul adds to this that the *real* concern the Corinthians ought to have is not what is lawful for them to do, but about how their actions will affect their brothers and sisters. Although it is not wrong *in principle* to eat meat that was sacrificed to an idol, it is wrong to betray your own conscience and do something that you believe to be wrong. Paul says at the end of this chapter:

Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, won't that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? ¹¹ So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. ¹² When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall."

What I may or may not do as a faithful Christian was the Corinthian's primary concern. But what *should have* been their primary concern was how their actions, lawful or not, would affect their fellow Christians. Even though Paul saw nothing wrong with eating meat offered to idols, he claims that he would give up meat altogether if doing so would steer a brother or sister away from sin.

This is a profound teaching, and it is one that perhaps we should revisit later this year when marijuana is legalized in this country. Some of you will be wondering whether it will be permissible as Christians to take marijuana once it is no longer illegal. Perhaps the more important question for you to settle is how your doing so would affect the others you share your life with.

- Finally, in chapter 11 Paul speaks of taking communion at the Lord's Table. In Corinth the custom was to remember the Lord's sacrifice by partaking an entire meal including bread and wine, and not just a corner of bread and a thimble full of grape juice, as we do. The problem with this, is that the fellowship meal was being used as a opportunity to reinforce the dividing lines rather than to promote unity. Members were bringing their own meals to eat rather than sharing everything in common (as with the potlach tradition at RBC). As a result, Paul exclaims that when they gathered together, one remains hungry while another gets drunk! Presumably, the wealthy members of the church were

bringing steak and lobster while the poor members were sharing a hotdog. Again, the underlying problem is a basic lack of concern for each other.

We could look at further examples of the problems affecting the Corinthian believers, but it is time now to look at what Paul says to correct them, in verses 12-31 of Chapter 12. I see this section as the core message of Paul's letter; it reveals Paul's heart for them, and a vision of what he hopes they can become. It is built upon even further in Chapter 13, in which Paul explains how Faith, Hope, and especially Love are the supreme spiritual gifts of God, but I think the core of it is still here in the latter half of Chapter 12. Let us consider it carefully:

V.12: "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ"

This is a familiar concept to most of us, at least to those who grew up in the Church, but it is a radical idea and it is worth thinking hard about. The members of the Church of Christ relate (or *ought to relate*) to one another in the same way that the members of a body relate to one another. We are the body of Christ.

Living bodies are fascinating things. Consider the many parts of a body, not just major parts like hands, feet, and legs, but organs, cells, and the particles making up a cell. Collectively, all of these parts can be said to form a single living body precisely because they are all being organized by one central life. When I eat an apple, the parts of the apple become parts of me, precisely because my life incorporates those parts for its purposes; they become energy to keep my heart beating so that blood continues to circulate, for example. On the other hand, if I swallow a nickel, it passes through me as an organism, but it never becomes a part of my body. This is because the parts of the nickel never contribute toward my living processes; they are a visitor in my body for a time, but they are not members.

The members of a church are members of a greater whole precisely because that greater whole has a purpose and use for them. They are to contribute to life of the whole; they have a particular function.

Relating to the fellow members of your church in the same way that members of a body relate to one another, is about as tight a connection as individuals can form. The unity in purpose and concern one for another that you see among the various members of a body ought also to characterize the various members of the church. This is what Paul wanted for the Corinthians and I don't think it is a stretch to suppose that it is what God wants for us. And yet, if we are honest about it, I bet that many of us would confess to being more closely connected with some of the mere social groups we are a part of than we are with our local church body. I think we should recognize this as a problem. It is not a problem just of individuals, who perhaps prefer to socialize with groups outside of the church more often than with groups inside the church, but a problem the body as a whole if it is not inviting, in an attractive way, a deeper sort of commitment. Our ability to attract and foster this sort of commitment was identified as one of the most important areas we need to grow in during the Church Health Initiative we participated in late in the Spring.

Maybe I can make this more plain with an example. I participate in a number of social groups in my life, but my participation in them comes in different degrees of strength. I am part of an Old Guy's mountain biking group, and I am also a part of a group that gets together every so often to play cards. With the biking group, I have taken it upon myself to contribute toward to life, or well-being of the group. I do this by posting messages inviting others on a ride once in a while, or by being the first to suggest a trail instead of just letting others organize it. With the card playing group, I confess that I haven't really done anything to contribute other than show up once in a while. I haven't hosted a game, though many other members have, and I haven't tried to schedule a card night. I simply participate in what others have worked to make happen.

Take a moment to consider your relationship to Riverdale Baptist. Some of you put countless hours into contributing to the life of the congregation, and others of you simply show up to participate in what others have worked toward. What Paul claimed to the Corinthians is that the members of the church are in fact members of Christ's body. If he is right, then we should, each of us, take our membership in this church much more seriously than we do with the mere social groups we are a part of. You should take a stance of ownership, recognizing it as *your* church, which cannot simply function just as well with or without you.

V.13-14: For we were all baptized by ^[c] one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴ Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

Recognize that the body of believers that gather here at RBC are very diverse, and that this diversity is a great source of strength. A body would not be a body if all of its parts were identical to each other, and in the same way we must recognize that it is good for us to have old and young, men and women, rich and poor, those who prefer traditional hymns AND those who prefer contemporary choruses. Perhaps we even have Jews and Greeks among us. A body is not made up of one part, or even one *type* of part, but of many, all working together for a common purpose, and that is a beautiful thing. Let it be so with us.

V.15-16: Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.¹⁶ 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 stop being part of the body.

Here is a neat thing about being part of a body: *it is not up to you* whether you are a part of it or not. A foot cannot simply decide that it doesn't belong to the body any longer, and that it will go and do its own thing. It can refuse to function as part of the body, for example by refusing to flex when the legs move, but that will only cause the entire body to limp or stumble rather than run. It will not make it the case that the foot is no longer part of the body. Once you've joined the body of Christ through baptism you can become a dysfunctional or poorly-functioning member of that Body, but you can't just decide that you don't belong to it any more.

Some of you have entertained similar thoughts. Because you don't lead worship, collect the offering, or care for the children downstairs, you think, you aren't really a member of this body of believers and it doesn't really matter if you choose not to participate. Not so. RBC requires all of its members to complete their particular function, whatever that may be, and you don't cease to belong here just because you don't happen to participate in worship services. If any of you is struggling to understand how you can contribute to the life of this church, I encourage you to

please speak with someone about it. Bring the concern to Pastor Michelle or speak to one of the elders. Speak to a friend or just to whoever is sitting next to you in the pew today. I think Paul was right about every member having a particular function in the life of the church and I am confident that you can find a place of belonging here.

V.21-23: 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!" ²² On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor.

Here, I think, we can find a message from Paul to the Corinthian church 2000 years ago, from God to all Christians making up the Church of Many Ages, and perhaps even a message from the Holy Spirit to us here at RBC today. Every member of the church is as vital to the well-being of the church as any other. True, there are some members in positions that seem more prominent: particularly, given the way we happen to organize things, our full-time pastors. But those positions cannot say to any other member of the Body of Christ, "I don't need you." Though they are more prominent in your mind when you think of the essential personnel at RBC, the same way that the parts of the face seem more prominent in your mind when you think of another person, *they are no more vital to the life of the Body* than any other member. When you think of Rayanne Klassen you are reminded of her beaming smile every Sunday morning and not of her spleen; but the spleen might be even more important for Rayanne's well-being than her smile. Maybe not...

Right now we are in the midst of a pastoral search, and there is a strong temptation to think that the good functioning of RBC is more dependent on filling that position, than it is on the full participation of any other of its members. Beware this thought: "RBC needs a new pastor much more than it needs me to fulfill my function in the body."

Now, I am a member of your pastoral search committee, and I do not want to give you the impression that I don't feel a pressing need for our committee to do its work efficiently. I do recognize that we need to fill our vacant position, and that we should not stall in doing so. However, I also think it is important for us to recognize that in the body of Christ no single

member is any more vital than any other. Our pastoral staff fill important roles, but YOU also have an important role to play and I want to encourage you today to seek that role from the Lord and to put as much energy into it as you can. If you recognize a void in our current operations, or some task that could be done better, do not be lured into thinking that hiring a new pastor will serve to fix that problem. Very likely, the Spirit of God is bringing that task to your mind precisely because he has equipped you to accept it as part of your own function in this body of believers.

V.24-26: But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it,²⁵ so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. ²⁶ If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

Its parts should have equal concern for one another. This is how a body functions, and it is the core driving concern of Paul for his brothers and sisters in Corinth. Have concern for one another. If the Corinthian church functioned like the body they in fact were, they would not have gathered at the Lord's table by each eating according to his worldly means. They would have been less concerned about whether they were permitted to fill their own bellies with meat offered to idols, and more concerned about keeping their fellows from betraying their own conscience by doing likewise. They would not have turned a blind eye to a man in their midst living in sexual immorality, but would have done whatever it took to encourage spiritual health instead.

As the Body of Christ we are to have concern for one another, and in at least some situations that concern should trump even the concern we take for ourselves. I thought about illustrating this concern by talking about what Immanuel Kant called the "Categorical Imperative", but I'll avoid that and just give you some down to earth examples. Here's what concern for one another looks like. We were camping this last week at Frenchman Lake. Gina's father and his family visited us one day, and as anyone ought to do when they visit someone at Frenchman Lake, they brought us a cinnamon bun from Braeburn Lodge. After dinner we warmed the bun in some tin foil over the campfire. Now as any true Yukoner knows, a Braeburn Lodge cinnamon bun has a thick outer layer of dough that is good, but it surrounds a gooey, delicious

middle core that is VERY good. My son finished dinner first and when he went to take some cinnamon bun he helped himself to the entire center portion. I grumbled at him and made him put most of it back, keeping only a fair share of it. Then my daughter finished dinner, and she also tried to help herself to the entire middle portion. She got a similar grumble from me. Mom's turn next, and mom said that she would like her fair share of the centre portion; no more and no less. THIS is what it means to have concern for one another; not just seeking your own advantage, but seeking a good that you can share equally among those you share your life with. What none of them knew is that before any of them even saw the bun, I had already eaten most of the center portion myself before dinner!

Showing concern for one another as the members of a body show concern for one another means desiring for yourself only what you can also desire that others share as well, and it has analogues in almost every area of life. If you desire the entire center portion of a Braeburn cinnamon bun to yourself, then you cannot ALSO desire that others get the same share of that good thing. One more example: I used to live in Surrey, BC. While there I worked across the Fraser River in Burnaby. The drive took 10 or 15 minutes on a Sunday afternoon, but on a weekday at 8am or 5pm it could take up to 2 hours. This is due mostly to the Patullo Bridge. Now, on the way home, traffic for the Patullo lined up in the left lane of MacBride Blvd; the right lane would take you over into New Westminster. That left lane for the bridge would sometimes have a line up a kilometer long, with no traffic at all in the right lane. So what did I do? Well, if you were bold (and selfish) enough, you could drive along the right lane, speeding past all the traffic, and then zip into the left lane just before the bridge when someone took too long to inch forward. Or, because we're Canadians, if you left your blinker on long enough someone would usually let you in. I did that at least 4 times a week, and I imagine some of the folks waiting in line came to recognize my vehicle. The thing about being a lane cheater is that you cannot consistently desire that everyone share in the same good. I wanted to enjoy the good of a shorter drive home and less time in bumper-to-bumper traffic. But I got to enjoy that only by cheating the system, and if everyone had tried to do the same thing, clearly it would just result in another bumper-to-bumper line-up in both lanes, and no one would enjoy the good I was seeking for myself. I was not treating my fellow commuters as members of the same body; their concerns were not my concerns. I had no desire to share in their troubles or to let them share in my goods.

I guess one take-away from all this is that Dave Anderson is a bit of a selfish jerk...

Here's another one: Don't be like me! At least within this fellowship of believers, make the decision that your concern for your fellows will at least rival your concern for yourself. Consider this: if you decide that you will show up Sunday morning to participate in a service that others have laboured to prepare, but will neither contribute to any of the activities of the church, nor contribute financially to support our operating budget, then you are attempting to gain for yourself an advantage that you cannot consistently desire that everyone enjoy. If we all did that, if no one contributed financially to RBC or participated in its activities then there would be no weekly services for you to join. If no one contributed to the leading of worship, then our services would be chaotic and unfruitful. You are a member of a body, and the body requires your activity in order to properly function.

Let me end with this. One of the great mysteries of the Christian faith is that one who dies to himself is raised into a new and even better sort of life. Living in this way, demanding that your concern for others rival your concern for yourself, actually ends up in a greater benefit to YOU than if you had just maximized what you think is best for yourself. Consider two approaches to a family cinnamon bun; we'll call them the David way and the Gina way. The David-way is to allow yourself to become convinced that your own greatest good lies in eating the center portion all to yourself. The Gina-way, on the other hand, is to sacrifice your own self-interest out of concern for the other members of the family; to curb the desire for the whole centre portion in favor of a desire only for an equal portion of it, so that everyone can enjoy the same good that you enjoy. Doing it Gina's way is obviously better for the family as a whole, and it obviously involves giving up one sort of good (eating the whole center portion yourself). But the truth that is often hidden is that Gina's way is also better for Gina! Gina's way involves sacrificing the good of the whole center portion to yourself, but it includes more and better goods that you'd miss out on if you did it David's way.

Some of you have allowed yourself to become convinced that it is to your benefit to allow others to do the heavy lifting in the work of the church. You think that things will go best for you if you contribute only minimally, leaving it to others to plan, organize, and lead our worship services, to look for opportunities for evangelism and fellowship outside of Sunday morning, to make enough financial donations to keep our bills paid, and to take up positions of leadership. Or, you think it

will be better if we hire a pastor to do all of those things. The challenge today, from this portion of scripture is that this thinking is just backwards. It is clearly better for the church as a whole if you contribute as much as anyone else, but it is also better *for you*. Your greatest good lies not in attempts to secure advantages that cannot be enjoyed by all, but rather in fully participating as a member, along with many other members, in the life of the body of Christ. You have been gifted by God for the very purpose of contributing to the good functioning of the church, his body, and you will find deep joy and satisfaction by doing so. There is simply no greater thing to be had in this life than an opportunity to use your unique gifts in the service of someone else in need. That is the secret of happiness. Now the greatest of human needs are spiritual in nature and it is the business of the church of Christ to address those needs. It follows that the greatest happiness, the greatest benefit *for you* lies in finding your place in the body of Christ and contributing to its work.

BENEDICTION

Go now from this place of worship and into the world we live in, not as separate individuals that just happen to gather together on Sunday mornings, but as members connected one to another in the same way as the parts of a body participate in one and the same life. May your joys be our joys and your troubles our troubles. May your activity as a member of this body bring you great joy and deep fulfillment. Amen