

1. One Body

In the introduction we saw how, in John 17, Jesus expressed in prayer His great desire for unity amongst His disciples. That unity is inclusive of His disciples, Himself and His Father, and His prayer lays before us the ideal for the church. It has to be said, that if the church and its members attained to that ideal, and lived it out practically, there would be no divisions, no disagreements, no cause for any disharmony among the followers of Jesus, there would be the same harmony and unity of purpose among Jesus' disciples as is seen between Jesus and His Father.

Disunity

Writing some 30 years after Jesus' prayer, and after some 15 to 20 years of ministry, the apostle Paul finds it necessary to exhort believers to, "endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit." Perhaps with Jesus' prayer in mind, and with a complementary vision of how church should be, Paul is confronting the reality of everyday church life, and he knows that the unity expressed and desired by Jesus is often far from the reality of church life. Even in his own life he experienced disunity, falling out with his close companion Barnabas so badly that they went their separate ways (Acts 15:36-40). During his ministry he witnessed sectarianism, heated debates, divisive heresies and personal animosities (cf. Acts 15:1,2; Acts 20:19; 1Cor. 1:12; 1Cor. 3:1-4; 2Cor. 12:20; Gal. 5:15; Phil.4:2), all of which were conspiring to tear the young churches to pieces, and which he had to warn about many times. Against this background we can understand the thankfulness expressed by Paul in his boasting of the Thessalonian church when he wrote, "the love of everyone of you abounds toward each other" (2Thess. 1:3,4), and it does seem the Thessalonians were the exception rather than the rule. Paul saw any disunity among the brethren as the result of carnal natures and fleshly lusts at work (1Cor. 3:3), for which the antidote is to walk in the Spirit, and to crucify the flesh with its passions and desires (Gal. 5:15-26). Where disunity is evident, carnality is at work on one or both sides of the division, and all parties to the disunity ought therefore with humility and self-examination, to be seeking with the Spirit's help to address and put to death any carnal desires and attitudes.

Ephesians chapter 4 finds Paul therefore urging the saints to be zealous, diligent and hard-working in seeking the unity of the Spirit. He sees that work as part of the task of ministry, and part of the maturing process of the disciple (Eph. 4:11-13). He encourages that work by highlighting seven specific areas where unity is expected and should be evident, the first of these is the one body.

One Body

Paul's use of the human body as an illustration of the church is inspired, it is simple, yet profound, and makes use of something with which we are all familiar - our own bodies!

Jesus is the Head (Eph. 4:15; Col. 1:18)

A body is made up of many parts, those parts are controlled by its head, the head is where the brain resides and sends out messages to the various parts. It is quite obvious that the head must

send complementary instructions to each part, and that each part must follow the instructions of the head in order for the body to function properly - otherwise the result is chaos. There are some illnesses whereby this process is disrupted which result in very debilitating conditions for those effected. What is true in the natural, is also true in the spiritual: Jesus is Head of the church, when each individual member of the church is receiving instruction from Him, and faithfully obeying His instruction, the whole works in unity; when any part refuses to cooperate with the Head, the body is unable to properly fulfil His instructions.

In Colossians Paul makes an important point about false ministers when he says they, “are not holding fast to the Head.” False ministers, though they may appear as “ministers of righteousness” (2Cor. 11:15), are masquerading, they do not receive their authority and instructions from Jesus, they are detached from the Head, serving their own purposes, and those of Satan. Jude emphasises this detachment of false ministers from the headship of Jesus when he calls them, “clouds without water, carried about by the winds; late autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, pulled up by the roots; raging waves of the sea, foaming up their own shame; wandering stars for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever” (Jude 12,13).

There is true ministry, and Ephesians 4:11 shows that it is Jesus Himself who gives some to the various ministerial roles. Ministry is given for the equipping and edification of the saints, and ministers, like all other members of the body, should operate in communion with, and as directed by Jesus the Head. While the church must accept and receive those with a true calling from the Lord to ministry, it is essential that members of Jesus’ body learn to recognise and discern those who are not attached to the Head, and so reject them and their destructive ministries. There can be no Biblical unity between those who are true members of the body of Christ and those who are not, and the clear Biblical advice to the church is to note those who promote wrong doctrine, and avoid them (Rom. 16:17,18).

Joints and Ligaments (Eph. 4:16; Col. 2:19)

Every part of the body is joined to another part, no one part can act on its own without the assistance of another part, you cannot detach any part of your body and make use of it, it would wither and die and be rendered useless. When a body is functioning correctly, all the parts work in unison to accomplish the purposes ordained by the head. So it is in the spiritual, as members of the body of Christ we are dependant on others within the body to fulfil our individual functions. Paul emphasised this interdependency of the saints when he wrote that they are, “joined and knit together by what every joint supplies” (Eph. 4:16), and, “nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments” (Col. 2:19); Paul sees that when each part is working effectively, and doing its share, the will of God is being fulfilled and the body grows, and there is increase. That increase includes both spiritual and numerical growth as can be seen in Acts 2:42-47 where the Lord gave numerical growth to the church; its members were of one accord, and growing spiritually through steadfast application to doctrine, fellowship and prayer.

Doing Our Part (1Cor. 12:12-31; Rom. 12:4-8)

Each part of our bodies has its own particular function, you cannot swop parts around, you cannot put your nose in place of your thumb and vice versa, it just will not work! So too, in the church, every member has a particular part to play according to their giftings and calling from the Lord. In 1 Corinthians 12 and in Romans 12 Paul lists various gifts, ministries and functions with which we may serve Him and one another. In both passages Paul makes the point that while there is one body, there are many members, but all members do not have the same function, and it is important to note that it is God who sets the members in their place in the body, as He pleases (1Cor. 12:18). For the body of Christ to function properly it is therefore imperative that each member knows his/her function in the body, and seeks to fulfil that function in obedience to the Lord.

No Division (1Cor. 12:25)

The above has presented a very brief outline of the doctrine of the body of Christ. There is much more that could be said, and I would point you to the scriptures mentioned for further personal study. The point though, which I hope is clear, is that Spirit-filled, born-again disciples of Jesus are members of His body, and that as such they are exhorted by the word of God to endeavour to be at unity with other members of the body of Jesus. Addressing the sectarian divisions in the Corinthian church, Paul asked, "Is Christ divided?" (1Cor. 1:13), to which the answer is of course, "no." If Christ is not divided, then it stands to reason, that the members of His body should not be divided. This is the ideal which Jesus prayed for, and for which Paul exhorted, and strove for in his ministry to the church. In reality it is an ideal which is very rarely attained, so often carnal attitudes such as pride, envy, selfish ambition and self-will stand in the way, and the resulting fall-out in disunity and disharmony can stunt church growth and foster discontent amongst members. There must be mutual love, respect, humility and submissiveness amongst the members of the body of Christ if the church is to grow, and present a good witness to the world (Jn. 13:35; Rom. 12:3; 10; 16; Phil. 2:1-4).

May we each know and fulfil the calling of the Lord on our lives, and may we do so in unity with our fellow members in the body of Christ. Let us do so without pride, or any thought of promoting self. We have nothing we did not receive, and all we do is by the grace of God, who Himself calls us, equips us, and enables us to serve Him and be a blessing to our brethren who are fellow members of His body.