

Life in the Body

Take a closer look

Perhaps your familiar with the work of Bev Doolittle. The American artist works mainly in watercolor, and are mainly scenes of the American West that feature themes of Native American life, wild animals, horses, and landscapes. But take a closer look. Bev Doolittle paintings are never quite what they first appear to be. One could look at one of her paintings many, many times and still manage to be surprised at a hidden detail.

Such is the nature of the church, the Body of Christ. Every part is unique and different and not quite what it first seems. The apostle Paul compares the church to the human body and asks, Is the whole body the eye? He's commenting on the tendency we Christians have had throughout history to magnify one aspect of the life of the church until we can no longer see the rest of it. One aspect becomes everything to us, and result is that the Gospel witness to the world is lost or grossly distorted. The Corinthians were. . .

Spiritual people with spiritual gifts

But Paul's correspondence with this church centres around a basic disagreement he has with them about spirituality. For Paul, the essence of spiritual life is *community* – building others up in the Christian faith. For the Corinthians however, the epitome of spirituality was a rather wild riot of speaking in tongues. Paul's comparison of the church to the human body has this abuse of tongues in public worship as it's backdrop.(1Cor 12:12-31a). For the Corinthians, speaking in tongues had become the centre-piece event of public worship. Now, note carefully that Paul always includes speaking in tongues in his list of proper spiritual gifts, but the *purpose* of every one of those gifts is always to bring about the fullest possible expression of God's love to people. And in terms of loving expression, the confusing Corinthian chaos of everybody off in their own little world speaking in tongues just doesn't qualify.

But as far as the Corinthians are concerned, *this* is what it's all about! *They* are "speaking in the tongues of angels". This is totally awesome! In *their* minds, they have attained to the highest level of spirituality which makes the teachings of the humble apostle Paul irrelevant to them. As far as they're concerned, this Paul is just the amateur hour. The Corinthians are, simply too cool for school-far too spiritual to be bothered with troubles of this world - human need, human relationships.

But in Paul's view, life in the Spirit never removes us from our earthly nature nor from our social existence, never absolves us of our responsibility for the needs of others. As imperfect as we are, in a dark and broken world we are given *saving grace, sufficient grace, amazing grace* because the life of the coming age has now broken in on us in the death and resurrection of Jesus. And *this* is the essence of Christian spirituality.

In the church of the Book of Acts, whenever there is some remarkable spiritual phenomena for which unbelievers demand an explanation, the answer the apostles always give to them is the Gospel. When the apostles were touched by tongues of fire on the Day of Pentecost and the onlookers asked what was happening, they preached the Gospel. When a Gentile Centurion named Cornelius has a vision of an angel of God, and he wants to know what it's all about, they preach the Gospel. This, said the apostles, is the presence of God's kingdom, *THIS* is Jesus who died and rose again. *This* is God's love for the world.

The Corinthian failure to act in a loving way by engaging in confusing and individualistic

acts of public worship had all the hallmarks of a *false spirituality*.

So in chapter 12 of First Corinthians Paul approaches the subject first reminding them that in their previous pagan lives they had had the exact same kind of ecstatic experience as they now are having in the church. So the only thing that will prove if theirs is a *genuine* work of the Holy Spirit is the confession that “Jesus is Lord.”

What distinguishes the true church from the pagan world is not any dramatic phenomena but one united confession: “*Jesus is Lord.*”

“For just as the body is *one* and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are *one body*, so it is with Christ”. It is this care for each other and this one confession of faith, this *unity* that is the starting point. But unity does not mean uniformity. In fact the great diversity within the Christian community is what proves . . .

The reality of the Spirit

“For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.”

The Christian church is really a miracle. The only possible explanation for how such a vast range of people could all find a home within the same community is the fact that we are *one in the Spirit*.

There is no indication in verse 13 that Paul is referring to water baptism; nor is there any case for a so-called “baptism in the Spirit” as a secondary experience one has sometime *after* becoming a Christian. No. The emphasis here is on that fact that *every single Christian believer* has fully received the Holy Spirit. There are no second-class Christians, no haves and have nots. The visual picture in baptism is one of being *immersed* (that is what the word in Greek literally means). When we come to faith in Christ we are *plunged* into a whole new realm of existence. We drink to the full measure of the Spirit’s blessings.

But this wonderful picture described by Paul as *the normal Christian experience* is something far more abundant and profound than has been the *actual* experience of perhaps most of the church throughout most of its history. We can so easily forget in day-to-day life that the Holy Spirit is the new element into which we are plunged – like coming out of air and into the water. The Holy Spirit differentiates us from the rest of unbelieving world. This new state of existence *should* allow us to transcend the usual boundaries of human society: race, religion, social class. One is no longer a Jew or a Greek. Slave or free. These distinctions no longer have any significance for Christians.

So why is has this deep experience, this profound reality of the Holy Spirit on a daily basis, so *rare* among Christians throughout so *much* of the church, throughout so *much* of its history? Why does the powerful working of the Holy Spirit seem to be confined to times of revival or seen only to certain individuals or certain communities when it *is* the birthright of every single Christian?

Well, perhaps – and this is no excuse -- but perhaps it is because on a daily basis you and I live very much *immersed* within the modern secular society with its scientific worldview. Our culture just doesn’t recognize God working in human history. That God would work his purposes in our lives is something *beyond belief* in the modern secular mind. And it’s hard to fight that when it’s all around us, when it’s the very air we breathe.

The other evening my friend Robert phoned. The last I saw him, back in the Fall, he was booked for major back surgery - fusing several disks . . . he was in constant, terrible pain.

The medication had troubling side effects. But suddenly, a few weeks before the surgery, the pain disappeared over the course of a few days. He went to the doctor, who supervised him going slowly off his medication. The pain didn't return. When the date of the surgery drew near, the doctors examined him and said there's no reason to do this surgery". The doctors asked him, "What did you do?" To which Robert could only say, "The only explanation I have is *God healed me.*"

To which the doctors could only say, "Well, mmm. You know, sometimes the body just heals itself."

This is the *atmosphere* in which we live. And as a result, we in the contemporary church tend to live in a perpetual . . .

State of denial

We deny the *reality* of the Holy Spirit. So, here's Paul's analogy for us: What if you woke up tomorrow and your *body* was in the same state of denial that most of the *church* is in most of the time? What if your foot said, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," and your ear said, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," What if you woke up with your *body* in that kind of state of denial? If that was the case, it would be debatable whether or not you could even get out of bed.

Our problem in the contemporary church isn't that spiritual oneness is not real anymore. It is as real today as it was in Paul's time. Our problem is that we in the contemporary church inevitably *deny some part of our existence* as the body of Christ. We tend towards a private spirituality, something we can do without the rest of the church. *We* have it right, but *those* people don't.

As a consequence, great tensions exist across the church today over our understanding of the Spirit's work. And is this not sure evidence that we are out of touch with the spiritual reality that we *are* one Body? But in our steps to *restore* that sense of unity we must always avoid at all costs the tendency to force *our version* of spirituality on others. There could be nothing more contrary to what Paul is trying to get at in 1 Corinthians 12 than the kind of manipulations we sometimes see in trying to create a "programmed unity" within the church. And herein lies. . .

The problem with conformity

Or as Paul puts it, "what if the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?"

In the case of the extreme body builder, we must ask, where are the kidneys? Where is the heart that must be straining to pump blood to all those grossly overdeveloped muscles? More importantly, where is the *brain*? What was he thinking!

In the church, each person must fulfill a very unique role that no one else can fill if the church is to be a "normal body" and not some kind of a monstrosity. Paul's analogy is about the diversity of gifts God gives and the many ways the Holy Spirit works in our lives. The tensions the Corinthian were experiencing were the direct result of *unequal treatment* of individuals in the church due to their social status. The wealthy people didn't consider their poorer and enslaved Christian brothers and sisters worth worrying about. And as a result, theirs was no longer a healthy church, but a *monstrosity*.

Paul's point in portraying this rather bizarre picture of the human body is that *everyone* in the church is needed. His questions are rhetorical; the answer he hopes for is, "Yes, *of course*

every member is needed, otherwise the function of the body will be incomplete.” This wasn’t a situation where certain people were just envious of others – that some were selfishly craving the limelight or competing for the most prestigious positions. No. The poorer members weren’t even being acknowledged as part of the church. In a healthy, balanced church every believer must be allowed to . . .

Fulfill a calling from God

Why? Verse 18: “God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as *he* chose.”

The diversity in the body is *God’s* idea. It is up to each believer to find their unique function and *function* as they should. For if *all* performed only one function the other functions would be lacking. The sure sign of a healthy church is one that *embraces diversity*: it allows for a wide range of people to empowered to do a wide range of things, where all are welcomed and all are included. Because, as Paul continues: “if *all* were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, 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.”

In this statement, the sensory organs – the eyes and ears – are speaking to the external limbs. What’s implied here that there are some in the Corinthian church who considered themselves to be at the top of pile. These ones think they can get along just fine without some of the “lower limbs” – those who rank lower on the social totem pole. But this, says Paul, is simply not the case.

The particular situation to which Paul refers is found in preceding passage (11:17-34). Christian worship in New Testament times centred around a meal that the believers ate together usually in the home of a wealthy patron of the church who had a house big enough to accommodate the entire congregation. But in that ancient society, *slavery* was very much an assumed reality of daily life. If one was rich and had slaves, one did not have to worry about finishing up the household chores before heading off to church. *That* was what slaves were for. So at Corinth, what was happening was the slave owner class were showing up for church right on time, and going right ahead with the praise and worship and the food and fun and fellowship while the slave class was still at home cleaning up after their masters. It didn’t occur to the slave owner class that this was not only rude but actually disrespectful to the *Lord* because it was, in effect, a denial of the existence of part of His body.

Something needed to change in the Corinthian church. They needed to start . . .

Celebrating the hidden gifts

The only reason those prominent, wealthy Corinthians could show up bathed and smelling nice in clean clothes was that others were at home serving them; cooking, doing laundry, hauling water. . . But here’s the disconnect: the wealthy Corinthians were coming together, speaking in tongues and having a wonderful time being “spiritual”, not recognizing they could only do so on the backs of others who they not only thought less important but also less spiritual.

“On the contrary,” says Paul, “the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this.”

Jesus said the same thing a slightly different way. He said, “whoever wants to be first

among you must serve all of you as a slave. For the son of man did not come to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:44,45)

Those at Corinthian of so-called “superior rank” thought they could get along perfectly well without certain others in the community. But in Paul’s analogy, the “weaker” internal organs actually only *seem* to be weaker, but in fact without them the whole body would cease to function.

The beauty of it all is that the church of Christ is designed to . . .

Stand together against most of the rest of the world

If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

I can’t help but think that *today* this passage, Paul’s analogy of the body in 1 Corinthians, is speaking to us on a global level about the terrible disaster in Haiti. Here is a people who would not have even been living there on that island had they not been brought there centuries ago as slaves. A people on whose backs was created vast wealth for their European masters, who when they threw off their chains in a revolt, were vilified and then largely ignored.

I don’t have to tell you give towards the relief effort, nor how desperate the situation is. What I think this Scripture might be saying to us today is that without these crushed and broken people in Haiti, we are not complete. If we do not alleviate their suffering, we are only hurting ourselves. But if we do act to change the situation over the coming weeks and months and years, if we do stand with Dr Manno and World Vision and the many members of Christ’s body in that devastated land, if the people of Haiti can be brought through this and can begin to have a life, if they can once more learn to rejoice, so will we.

This is life in the body.