

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 31 October 1999

No. T0082

Speaker: Mr Gordon Kell

The Church of Christ: The Body of Christ

The human body has a head and lots of internal and external parts which have functions necessary to our well being. Of course, to work properly, these different parts have to be connected to the brain. This connection is provided by the nervous system through which the brain sends all its messages enabling us to function. By this means life is expressed. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul uses the human body as an illustration to describe how the body of Christ works. The body of Christ is made up of every true believer in the Lord Jesus Christ throughout the world. It has a Head Who is in Heaven; the Lord Jesus. Every member of the body has a function to perform which helps the whole body to work properly and express the life of Christ. The Holy Spirit provides the connection between every member on earth and the Lord Jesus Christ in heaven.

This is explained in more detail in today's chapter. I have broken down the chapter into the following sections:

- Spiritual gifts are designed and directed by the Godhead (verses 1-6)
- Power only comes from the Holy Spirit (verses 7-11)
- Every Christian has a distinct purpose (verses 12-19)
- Every Christian is needed (verses 20-27)
- God uses gifted people to build His church (verses 28-31)

Spiritual gifts are designed and directed by the Godhead (verses 1-6)

The opening verse of the chapter is very interesting. Paul did not want the believers at Corinth to be ignorant. It is possible for Christians to act in a way which show they are ignorant of God's will. The Corinthian church, in spite of all its knowledge and gift, was divided, proud, worldly and tolerated immorality. Paul wrote to them to put right the many things which were wrong with their personal lives and the way they conducted themselves in the church. One of the things they misunderstood was the use of spiritual gifts. The Corinthians background was one of idolatry. Paul explains in verse 3 that Jesus is Lord and can only be recognised as such by the Holy Spirit. In the world Christ is rejected. The Christian recognises Him as Lord through the indwelling the Spirit of God. It was common for hostile Jews and heathens to exclaim "Curse on Jesus" or "Anathema Jesus". Paul reminds the Corinthians that it is the work of the Spirit of God to proclaim Jesus as Lord. This is an important starting point to what Paul was about to explain. Because Jesus is Lord then all that is done by Christians should come under the direction of that Lordship. Just as the brain controls the body, so the Lord Jesus directs His church by the power of the Spirit of God.

Paul also introduces the Trinity into the direction of spiritual gifts in verses 4-6. He explains that we do not all have the same gifts. However, when these different gifts are used under the direction of the Holy Spirit, they combine to benefit the whole body of Christ. First it is Holy Spirit who distributes various gifts. This is emphasised in verse 11; "the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills." Spiritual gifts can only be used effectively in the Spirit's power. Then it is the Lord Jesus who gives us different services to be undertaken for His glory. Spiritual gifts can only be used effectively under the Lord's authority. Finally, it is also God Who works in us to accomplish His will. Spiritual gifts can only be used effectively in God's will. It is not by accident that Paul first describes the unity of the Godhead in connection with the distribution spiritual gifts before he then goes on to explain the unity of the body of Christ. This is very powerful. The Godhead is united in purpose and action. The church should also be united in purpose and action. One of the greatest dishonours to Christ is that His people are divided. His heartfelt prayer in John 17 was that "they may be one as we are". Of course, there are serious matters which sometimes cause the people of God to separate. But in this chapter Paul is concentrating on unity not separation.

Power only comes from the Holy Spirit (verses 7-11)

In verse 7 Paul explains an important principle. The manifestation of the Spirit through spiritual gifts is for the profit of the church. So often gift is regarded as a personal thing to be used as we think fit. The Corinthians had become proud of their gifts and used them for self glorification. The point about a gift is that it is given. It is not something which has its source in us but which has been given to us, in grace, by God. It is not to be used to draw attention to ourselves but for the building up and help of other members of Christ's church. In other words it is to be used

selflessly not selfishly. When spiritual gifts are used properly it is the Spirit of God who is manifested, not the person who is gifted.

From verse 8 Paul lists some of the spiritual gifts. The list is not intended to be a comprehensive one but is especially linked to the work of the Holy Spirit. Gifts are also highlighted in other Scriptures, particularly in Romans 12:6-8, where the gifts are linked to the will of God, and Ephesians 4:11-16, where they are linked to the victorious Christ.

It is interesting to look briefly at the gifts listed in this chapter and see how they are used to build up the body of Christ. The first two mentioned are the word of wisdom and the word of knowledge. Wisdom is to see things as God sees them and to act accordingly. In other words, applying God's word in our lives. The word of knowledge implies understanding God's word. When you take a driving test, you are tested first on whether you understand the theory of driving, then your actual driving technique is tested. It is impossible to be wise without knowledge but it is possible to be knowledgeable but unwise. In the church we need teachers who are gifted to explain the Scriptures and impart spiritual knowledge and who are also able to apply the Scriptures to the circumstances of life.

The gift of faith in verse 9 does not mean the everyday faith all Christians should exercise but the extraordinary confidence some Christians have in God which enables them prove God's power in a special way. An example of this was George Müller who, during the last century, established an orphanage in Bristol and proved time and again God's ability to meet all the spiritual and material needs of this work. In doing so he encouraged the faith of many ordinary Christians. The gift of healing refers to the ability given by God to heal. Working of miracles is the ability given by God to do that which is beyond the bounds of human possibility. Prophecy is the ability given by God to communicate God's word. It is not restricted to foretelling the future but rather forth telling God's mind, especially necessary at a time when the people of God did not have the completed scriptures. The gift of discerning spirits is the power to distinguish whether what is communicated is of God or not. The final gifts mentioned are speaking in other untaught human languages and being able to interpret what is being said.

Through these gifts the Holy Spirit manifested Himself. He was the One who empowered the gifts and directed their use for the profit of the whole body of Christ. And, although the gifts were different, it was the same Spirit working. Paul uses the expression the "same Spirit" four times in verses 8-11. You see diversity is not division but the means by which unity is expressed. Our human body works in complete unity because the countless different parts it has are controlled by the brain and the nervous system. The body of Christ expresses true unity when the countless members are empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Every Christian has a distinct purpose (verses 12-19)

Paul continues to compare how the human body operates with the way the body of Christ works. In verse 13 he reminds us how we came into the body of Christ and how we are sustained as members of that body. It is by the power of one Spirit that we have been baptised into one body. When did I become a member of the body of Christ? When I trusted Christ through the work of the Spirit of God. Once saved I am sustained in my new life by the ministry of the Spirit. I come into the body of Christ once, but once part of it, I need the ministry of the Holy Spirit to enable me to enjoy and express the life that I have now in Christ. This is done in fellowship with the other members of Christ's body. The Holy Spirit is in us all and with us all. This is demonstrated through the manifestations of the Spirit when He works through the individual members to build up the other members.

There is an old Jewish fable about heaven and hell. In it hell has a great table filled with the most appetising foods. Around the table are famished people who all have long spoons attached to their hands. The spoons are so long that it is impossible to get food to their mouths. Because they cannot feed themselves they starve. In heaven there is a similar table with the same kinds of delicious food. The people also have long spoons attached to their hands. But they are all happy, well fed and enjoying each other's company. Instead of trying to feed themselves, they used the long spoons to feed each other! The Spirit's work is to make us Christ-centred and not self-centred. The result is that we constantly think of the welfare of our fellow Christians rather than our own welfare. They, of course, look after me. This all spills over into a concern for the spiritual and material welfare of our fellow man.

From verse 15 the apostle explains what happens when I become self-centred in a self-pitying way. It is very sad when Christians become obsessed about what they are not. When I think I am not useful because I am not gifted in the same way as another person it may appear a humble attitude. But it is not humble at all. It is arrogant. I am really saying God got it wrong because He did not make me like that brother or sister. I am also saying I am not satisfied with God's will and purpose for me. More than this, there is the danger that, because we do not value God's purpose for us, we will not value God's work in the lives of others. Some Christian become so dissatisfied with the place God has given them that they become destructive rather than constructive. In verse 16 Paul is really asking, "What would happen if the foot and ear decided to stop functioning because they were not a hand or an eye?" The whole body would be disadvantaged. There are many functions to be fulfilled in the church and every one is essential.

How much loss has Christ's church suffered because I am not prepared to be content with what God wants me? I should get on with doing what Christ has enabled to do.

The whole point is that it is God's church and He has designed and placed every member who is part of it. In the book of Exodus in the Old Testament, Aaron the High Priest had a breastplate he wore when he went into the presence of God. On it were twelve precious stones arranged in rows. Jewellers have remarked that these stones are perfectly arranged to reflect not just beauty of each individual stone but the added radiance which comes from the way the stones have been placed in relation to each other. God's wisdom is perfect. You are specially prepared by God to fill a unique role in His church, a place no one else can fill. Do not make the mistake of challenging the wisdom of God and failing to fulfil the ministry He has given you to do. Verse 18 says, "God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased." My father-in-law used to say to me, "Gordon, God has not put people in the church to please you but to please Himself!" This helped me, especially at those times when I did not appreciate or get on with some of my fellow Christians. Once we see the value God has placed on our brothers and sisters in Christ we begin to value them properly.

Our diversity should stimulate us to express unity. If we were all alike, the church would not be a body but a uniform mass. This is a tragic mistake. Soon after the church was formed, Christians soon began dividing into groups. Paul raises this in 1 Corinthians 1:10-13. Christians keep repeating this fundamental mistake. We think uniformity is unity. So what do we do? We break off into groups and begin meeting with Christians who think just as we did do. We make artificial barriers based on interpretation of the scriptures. We make rules. We lose the dynamic experience of Christian fellowship. We also lose the benefit of each other's gifts and each other's presence as well as the constant challenge to be Christ-like to maintain the unity of the Spirit. How many Christians have left a fellowship just because they did not get on with other believers? Many use the highest principles to justify their position. But so often the church is robbed of fulfilling Christ's great desire as He went to the cross, "That they may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me." (John 17:23). This was a desire for a unity which would lead others to Christ.

Some Christian friends of mind who belong to a well known Christian organisation once told me that they had the greatest experience of the body of Christ when they went away for a weekend with other members of the same organisation. Although they were from different backgrounds and fellowships they could express unity. I had to say that, although it might have been a wonderful experience, it was not what Christ had in mind. It is relatively easy to express fellowship with Christians we hardly know over a brief weekend together. It is far harder, and much more important, to express the body of Christ week in and week out with Christians you know very well and with whom you have to live and work. When in those circumstances we express the unity of Christ's church, it leads people to Christ. When it does not happen, people in the world are at best confused and at worst driven away from Christ.

Every Christian is needed (verses 20-27)

In verse 20 Paul reaffirms that the body is made up of many members. Every member of the body of Christ is needed! In verse 21 the other side of self-centredness is highlighted. This time it is not the self-pity but independence. The comparisons he makes are interesting. The eye by which we see is compared to the hand with which we do things. The head, where the brain does the thinking, is compared to the feet which do the walking. He compares what represents perception, thoughtfulness and intelligence with what represents action, practicality and toughness. This point would not have been lost on the gifted but proud Corinthians. They liked the intellectual aspects of Christianity but had forgotten about the practical expression of true Christian love which Paul brings home to them so beautifully and powerfully in chapter 13. God knows just what we are like. He knows that naturally we gravitate into particular groups and can begin to look down on other believers who do not think about things in exactly the same way as we do. The eye and the head are higher up the body than the hands and the feet. But we would not get very far without these lower parts of the body. Paul teaches us that every member is needed and those which are the least prominent or attractive are as essential as any other member.

Paul uses the example of a clothed body. We dress in such a way to make the whole body attractive. We expose some parts of the body and enhance others by the clothes we wear. Paul, was of course assuming normal not outrageous dress! The point he is making is that we dress to make the whole body attractive. So it should be in the church. The value of the whole body should be considered. It would be very unusual if we went out in the morning with a overcoat on but no shoes. Paul is simply explaining that we view the human body as one and care for it in that way. We are not to undervalue or exclude different members but to make efforts to acknowledge the value and contribution each member makes.

Paul explains the reason for this in verse 25, "That there should be no division in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another." We all recognise the awful experience it must be to lose a hand or an arm or a leg. When this does happen, the body is incomplete and much must be done to compensate for the loss.

When you, for example, bang your leg and it swells up and it is difficult to move, what is happening? The body is coming to the aid of the injured part by protecting it and immediately starting the healing process.

I recently was taken into hospital with kidney stones. I was in extreme pain and was bilious. I asked the doctor why I was so bilious when my stomach was not the problem. He told me that when you are very ill the body shuts down all unnecessary work and concentrates on the problem area. So it gets rid of undigested food for example and directs its energy where you need it. Paul certainly knew about the human body. Perhaps Luke, the beloved physician had helped him. He continues in verse 26, "If one member suffers all the members suffer with it." When we are ill our whole body feels it and sympathises. That is how we are to react in the body of Christ. If one believer suffers, we are to suffer alongside that brother or sister with the aim of protecting and immediately starting the healing process. In so sympathising, we minister Christ Who, as our great High Priest, now lives to feel all our needs and to meet them (Hebrews 4:14-16).

Equally, being in the church of Christ is a joyful experience and we are to rejoice in the progress and expression of Christ we see in the lives of our fellow believers. It is an enormous encouragement to Christians when they are appreciated and valued. Let us do all that we can to see Christ in one another and value the fellowship and gifts of fellow believers especially those with whom we meet regularly.

God has given gifted people to build up the body of Christ in love (verses 28-31)

In the final section of our chapter, Paul re-emphasises that it is God Who appoints those who build up the Church. We need to be continually reminded that it is God's Church and He is the One Who equips His people to build it up. The gifts given in verse 28 have an order. It is also important to understand that some gifts were for a given period. For example, in Ephesians 2:20 we read that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone." After Christ's ascension the apostles and prophets had the ministry of unfolding the revelation of God which is now contained in the New Testament. This ministry was completed in the first century of the Church's history. People cannot claim today to be Christ's apostles and prophets because that work has been finished. In the list we are looking at, the apostles are first and prophets second in order of importance. Then teachers are placed third. Their ministry is to unfold all the Scriptures to people of God. It is interesting to note that evangelists are not mentioned here. I think it is because Paul is stressing the building up of those who are already saved.

Afterwards he lists miracles, healing, helps, governments and tongues. Some of these gifts were especially confined to the apostolic period such as miracles and healing. The evidence for this is that, in Paul's later life, he was unable to heal some of his friends or himself. The gifts of being a help and support and giving spiritual guidance in the Church are still very much needed. These gifts should not be overlooked or undervalued. The gift of tongues was a sign especially to unbelieving Jews as Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 14:20-22.

Finally Paul asks rhetorically in verses 29-30 if we all have these gifts. Of course, we do not. We are encouraged to desire the greater gifts but he was about to show them in chapter 13, a more excellent way; love. The Corinthians were certainly gifted people. But they had become disorderly and extravagant in the way their gifts were used. Paul teaches us that we do need the gifts God has given and we should desire the greater gifts so that the church is built up. But he also goes on to teach that gifts cannot be effective unless they are ministered in Christ's love.

The body of Christ is the witness to God on earth. It was intended to be expressed both in a local and universal sense. Christians have failed terribly in this witness because down the centuries we have moved away from God's great design. As a result the world has a distorted picture of Christ because, through our self-centredness we have not expressed the oneness He desired. The challenge of today's chapter is to bring us back to His model and show by the love that we have one for another that we are His disciples.

Let us pray today for the grace that all Christians need to return to God's model for His church. Let us determine to see Christ in each other and to do all we can to encourage and build up our fellow believers particularly those with whom we regularly meet. And let us obediently follow the pattern He has given us to express in our lives and in our fellowship that we are linked to the Lord Jesus and each other by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.