

HOW THE BODY WORKS

by Ray C. Stedman

We are in Chapter 12 of First Corinthians this morning, beginning at the 12th verse, where we come to the passage that, above all others, answers a question frequently asked today. I doubt if anyone here has not been asked this question at one time or another. What do you say when somebody comes to you and asks, "Have you been baptized with the Holy Spirit?"

That is a very hard question to answer, because there are so many conflicting viewpoints as to what that *baptism of the Holy Spirit* consists of. The passage we start with this morning is the only place in the entire Bible where the baptism of the Holy Spirit, what it consists of and when it occurs, is explained to us, although it is referred to in a number of places. Therefore, this is a very significant passage.

Paul has been talking to the Corinthians about their spiritual gifts and their part in the Body of Christ, and then he goes on to say these words:

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. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body -- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free -- and all were made to drink of one Spirit. {1 Cor 12:12-13 RSV}

In this chapter, the apostle begins to use an analogy that will help us understand how the church is designed to function. He stands before us a human body, and draws lessons from it all through the rest of the chapter, as to its parallel with the functioning of the Body of Christ.

It is more than a mere figure of speech to say that the church is the Body of Christ. God really takes that seriously. It is so much so his body by which he works today that he has given us a visual aid, to live in, and walk around in, and examine, and think through what is the meaning of the church as the Body of Christ.

That is where Paul begins. "Just as the body is one and yet has many members," he says, "so also it is with Christ." Notice it is not "so also it is with the church," because it is the church and Christ that constitutes the Body of Christ. If you stand in front of a mirror and look at your body you should be struck by the fact that it is divided into two major sections, the head and the torso. The head is the control center of the body, while the torso is the biggest part of it, and the part to which the members, the arms, the legs, etc., are attached. This is especially designed to help us understand how the church is to function, for the whole body, plus the head, constitutes the Body of Christ.

This is an amazing statement here that we are part of Christ. That is what Paul is saying. We constitute the means by which Christ functions within the world, and it is very important that you hold that concept clearly in your mind if you want to understand how the church works. It is a body with many members, and yet it is only one body. It is not many bodies, many denominations. They are all tied together by sharing the same life, and they are tied with the head so that they function as his means of expressing his life in this world.

Now Paul answers the question, "How did we get into that body?" We were not born into it as infants; the Body of Christ does not consist of everybody in the world, only certain ones. His answer is clear, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body." That is the "baptism with the Holy Spirit" predicted by John the Baptist, predicted by Jesus himself, fulfilled for the first time on the Day of Pentecost, and continually fulfilled ever since whenever anybody believes in Jesus. They are baptized then by the Spirit into the Body of Christ and made part of the living Christ as he has been working in the world through all these twenty centuries since.

That indicates, of course, that all Christians who are born again have already been baptized by the Spirit, so when somebody asks you, "Have you been baptized by the Holy Spirit?" the answer is "Yes," if you are a

Christian. You could not be a Christian without having been baptized by the Holy Spirit. You are made part of his body. It is not always accompanied by tongues, or healings, or fire, or even a chill down your spine. You are made to be a part of the Body of Christ without even feeling that you are, and yet you are all baptized into one body.

Then Paul says it does not make any difference what your origin is, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, "all were made to drink of one Spirit." Notice in that one little verse the word "all" occurs twice. We *all* were baptized; we *all* were made to drink, or to be indwelt by one Spirit. When you drink a glass of water you take the water into yourself; when you drink of the Spirit you take the Spirit into yourself, and you are indwelt by him. That is why this passage clearly establishes for us that all believers are both *baptized by* and *indwelt by* the Holy Spirit.

This passage beautifully parallels something very profound that Jesus said to his disciples in the Upper Room, recorded in John's Gospel, when he taught them about the coming of the Holy Spirit. He said his function would be that of a strengthener, that of an encourager, a comforter, a teacher and a guide into all truth. But above all other things, the Holy Spirit was sent to "take the things of mine," Jesus said, "and reveal them unto you" {cf, John 16:15} -- to make Jesus himself real to every believer. This, of course, is what keeps Christians Christian. If we did not have the fellowship of a living Lord, day by day and week by week throughout all our Christian life, we would never remain Christians. It is not intellectual conviction that keeps us Christian. It is the warmth and joy and fellowship of the presence of Christ that does so. That is the work of the Holy Spirit, and that is why he came.

Jesus put that in a very beautiful little formula: He said that the relationship we would have would be this, "You in me, and I in you," {John 14:20}. That is what you find fulfilled here in regard to the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit baptizes us into the Body of Christ he puts us into Christ, "you in me." He joins our life with his; he becomes our source of existence and strength; we are part of him. Then when we are "indwelt" by the Spirit, we have all been made to "drink" of one Spirit, you find the fulfillment of our Lord's words, "I in you." That is the power by which we are to live. So it is this dual ministry of the Holy Spirit, baptizing us into the body, filling us with the Spirit so that we are both "in Christ" and he is "in us," that constitutes the mystery and the marvel of the church.

That is what the church is. It is not just a group of religious people gathered together to enjoy certain mutually desired functions. It is a group of people who share the same life, who belong to the same Lord, who are filled with the same Spirit, who are given gifts by that same Spirit, and who are intended to function together to change the world by the life of God. That is the work of the church.

The apostle goes on in the next few verses to make this crystal clear by explaining to us just how it works. He is describing now how the body functions, and he is answering two major problems, two mental attitudes that you often run up against in the church:

The first one is the feeling of insignificance. I wonder how many people here this morning have not said to themselves at one time, "I love to come to church but I don't feel there is anything I can do. I can't contribute to the work of the church because I don't have any abilities. Others know so much more than I." Paul now takes up that very attitude:

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. {1 Cor 12:14-16 RSV}

Paul says that if your foot should say, "Well I can't do all the things a hand does. It's so flexible. It is hooked onto that long arm, and it is used all the time. I can't wiggle my toes like the hand can wiggle the fingers; I just can't do what the hand can do, therefore I really don't belong in this body," it would be ridiculous, wouldn't it? That does not make the foot any less a part of the body. The foot is deceiving itself. If the ear says, "Because I can't see like an eye, I am not part of the body," the ear is deceiving itself. It is part of the body. The apostle is saying that if you think of yourself as a member of the church, the Body of Christ, and you say

to yourself, "Well, because I can't stand up and preach or teach or lead a meeting, there is really nothing I can do in the Body of Christ," you are deceiving yourself. You have not changed reality any. You are still a part of the body. You have shut your eyes to truth. You need to open them to see the part God has given you.

There are no insignificant members of the body. The reason for this kind of thinking is because we have the wrong idea of what the work of the church is, and this is why people begin to feel this way. There is a widespread concept today that the real work of the church is getting together and having a great meeting on Sunday morning where we enjoy learning from the Scriptures and fellowshiping with one another. And, this concept goes, people who lead these meetings have certain gifts. They have to keep everything in order, etc. Others in the congregation look at them and say, "That is the work of the church. I can't do any of those things, therefore, I really have no part to play in the church."

But that is not the work of the church at all. As we have already seen in previous messages, the work of the church is to heal the broken-hearted out in the world, to give deliverance to the captives, to open the eyes of the blind, and to preach the good news to the poor and despairing of heart. That is what the Body of Christ has come into the world to do -- to encourage, strengthen and help people, and especially to deliver them from the guilt, the loneliness and the misery of sin and to set them free from the bondage of foul tempers and evil habits and all the rack and ruin of life. That is what the work of the church is. And it does not go on here, it goes on out there. This is merely part of the training program. We do not come to church to fulfill the work of the church. We come here to get ready to fulfill it out there. If you have that in mind, then there is definitely a part for every member, without exception.

That is what Paul is arguing here. You are only kidding yourself if you say that because you cannot lead, or teach, or preach, you are not a part of the body and do not have a function within it. In that he goes on to say:

If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? {1 Cor 12:17 RSV}

What a ridiculous body if everybody did the same thing and if the work of the church only consisted of a handful of things that people did on Sunday morning. When Ron Ritchie first joined our staff as High School pastor he was attempting to teach the young people this truth about the body. One day he painted a football white, and then painted an eyeball, an iris, and a pupil on it. He wrapped the "eye" in a blanket, put it on his arm, and went into the High School group meeting. As he walked around he would say to the kids, "How do you like my baby?" They would look, and here would be this big eye staring at them, and they would say, "Oh gross! That's terrible." Then he said to them, "What if your girlfriend was nothing but a big eye and you took her out for a milkshake and propped her up in the booth opposite you and tried to carry on a conversation and all she does is stare at you with this one big unblinking eye? How distorted, how gross that would be." He got the point across.

If there are only a few jobs making up the work of the church, what a terrible distortion of the intent of God in the Body of Christ that is. There are many jobs in the work of the church, many gifts are to be employed, and they are not to be employed only here. Some of them are, but the great majority, by far, are to be employed right out where you live. That is where the work of the church goes on. I do not know anything that I long more to accomplish than to get that idea across to people. We have been so brainwashed with the conventional idea of the church that we need to be dynamited out of that concept, to capture again the glorious excitement of Jesus Christ walking through the hurt of this world, and touching with a healing hand, by the instrumentality of his people, the blind eyes, the lame legs, the infirm bodies and the destroyed lives all around. That is what the work of the church is: Christ at work in the world.

Paul goes on:

But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose. {1 Cor 12:18 RSV}

That means that where you live, and with the people with whom you live, is the very place God wants you to exercise the gift he has given you to do the work of the church. He arranged the organs of the body where he

chose, and:

If all were a single organ, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. {1 Cor 12:19 RSV}

I hope that is clear, because that should forever settle the question of feeling insignificant as part of the body. You cannot say to yourself, "There is no place for me," for there definitely is.

Now let us take the next problem that surfaces in a church, an independent spirit:

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."

It is amazing that in many congregations people get the idea that they do not need the rest of the body; they can function on their own; they have their own abilities, their own ministry, and they can do things quite apart from others. This always creates a sense of competitiveness, of rivalry. Last week I was down in Palm Springs, speaking to pro golfers. I was struck again by the fact that golfers are by nature independent. A golf tournament is a struggle of independent egos pitted against each other. The golfers all rely on their own abilities to try to beat out the other man. That is the nature of golf. It is not like football, where each one plays his own role but works with the other team members to accomplish something. I am afraid many congregations become more like golfers, with everybody going out on their own and paying no attention to and not valuing what others are doing.

But, as Paul points out, in your own physical body you would be in a terrible state if your members did that. What would happen if the eye said, "I don't need the rest of the body. I'll just roll around seeing things and let the rest of the body go." Why, you would instantly go blind, and the rest of the body would bump into everything. No, we all need one another.

So Paul argues:

On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts [and we have them] are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. {1 Cor 12:22-24a RSV}

He is still talking about our physical body. He says we must remember that the parts which seem to be weaker are actually indispensable. I was preaching in a certain place in the East once and a doctor came up to me afterwards, and said, "You may be interested to know that there is a certain part of your body that is absolutely essential to you as a preacher. You probably do not even think about it when you are preaching, and yet without it you could not do the work you are doing. Do you know what it is?" I said, "No. Is it my tongue, or my brain?" "No," he said, "those are obvious. It's your big toe. Did you know that if you didn't have a great toe on each foot you could not even stand up to preach? It is the toe that has the ability to sense when your body begins to lean, or shift, or get out of balance, or fall, and it immediately strengthens you so that you can stand up and speak." I have been guarding it very carefully ever since, because I need that big toe! It is an essential part of my ministry.

Paul is saying here that this is true in the Body of Christ. We see people with the gift of helps, those people who seem to be able to see what is needed to be done. Food needs to be served, chairs need to be set up, a house needs to be cleaned, some ministry needs to be helped. They are able to do it, and they enjoy doing it. We tend to think, "Oh, well, they're nice to have around, but how important are they in the work of the church? After all, they do not teach, or preach, or sing, or anything like that." Do you know what would happen in this congregation if those people ceased using the gift of helps? We would soon be unable to preach or teach. We would run into each other and stumble over each other and nothing would get done right.

Paul says, "those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty." Have you ever noticed that people with knobby knees

are always careful to choose clothing that hides their knees? If we think our shoulders are not broad enough we tend to buy clothing that emphasizes shoulders. There is this inbuilt tendency in human life to try to augment those parts that are less honorable. Notice how the apostle puts it, "parts we think less honorable." They are not, really. It is just our idea of them that makes them appear that way, but how carefully we take account of that and try to work it to our advantage.

I am sure Paul is referring to what we used to call our "private" parts when he says "our unpresentable parts." (They are not so private anymore.) But we treat these with great modesty. Paul simply draws the analogy with the Body of Christ. He says there are hidden, secret functions within the body, never mentioned in public, that are nevertheless exceedingly important. Take the ministry of prayer, for instance, and those people who consistently pray for others. Nobody knows about them. There is a lady in this congregation who spends hours each day praying for the staff and members of this church. She counts it her ministry. You seldom see her at meetings, she has difficulty getting out, but how she upholds us in prayer. What a mighty, valuable ministry that is. That is what the apostle is referring to. So he says:

But God has so composed the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. {1 Cor 12:24b-25 RSV}

When you begin to understand what the church is, as God sees it to be, this will be the result. You will begin to have the same care for one another. You will stop saying that teachers are all-important, or a certain line of preaching or doctrine is the great and important thing. You will see that God works the whole body together in a beautifully articulated and coordinated way.

There is nothing in the world more beautiful, more exquisite than the human body. It is the most beautifully balanced and delicately articulated instrument the world has ever seen. All the computers in the world put together cannot do what a single human body can do, and it does it with such exquisite grace when it is functioning right.

I played golf yesterday with three professional golfers. These vigorous young men were able to hit the ball 270 yards straight down the fairway. Then I would come along three or four strokes later and join them. It was wonderful to watch them; they did everything right. (I was pleased with one thing about myself: I at least was as consistent as they were; I did everything wrong!) But it was beautiful to watch the articulation of the human body.

Now there is nothing more beautiful and more effective and more exquisitely, delicately balanced than the church of Jesus Christ. Spiritually it is the most marvelous organism in the whole universe. The angels are longing to look into the functioning of the Body of Christ in the world today. God has put it together, therefore, we ought to have great care for one another. And, as Paul says:

If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. {1 Cor 12:26 RSV}

Notice that he does not say all "should" suffer with it, or all "should" be honored together. He says they actually are.

In Southern California this week we fell into a conversation about a brother who has been greatly used of God who has fallen into evil and sin in his life. He has lost his ministry, and I was thinking about him in connection with this verse. Because he has fallen into dishonor, all who meet him or hear of him see the whole Body of Christ less honorably than they did before. They will look upon me, as a Christian, less honorably than they did before because of his action. You do not have to be aware of the suffering or dishonor of another brother or sister to be affected by it. You *are* affected by it.

Now it is true the other way around also. If one be honored, all are honored with him. If some member of the body does an outstanding piece of work that opens the door for the deliverance of hundreds of people, or even a few people, and ministers the grace and the love of Christ, everybody touched by that will be blessed by it.

They will regard the Body and the Church of Christ in greater honor than before. So the responsibility for the reputation of the body rests with every one of us, and how we act is going to govern how other people see the Body of Christ at work in the world today. We belong together and we suffer together.

I have often pointed out that some years ago I had a badly injured wrist. It swelled up and got very sore. The rest of my body was so concerned that it sat up all night with it to keep it company! My body did not just say, "Oh, go to sleep! Go off and hurt over in the corner and let me go to sleep." It suffered with it all night long. That is what we do also.

The closing paragraph of this chapter is simply a beautiful gathering up by the apostle of all these themes in which he is especially highlighting the divine stamp upon the church:

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. {1 Cor 12:27 RSV}

There is that remarkable unity in diversity. The two combined mark the work of God.

And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, {1 Cor 12:28a RSV}

This is not in order of rank. This is in order of historic appearance; it is a chronological order. First there came the apostles; these were followed by the prophets; then the teachers began to appear in the church,

... then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. {1 Cor 12:28b RSV}

All that diversity is necessary, Paul says, to the functioning of the church in its work in the world:

Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all Interpret? {1 Cor 12:29-30 RSV}

The answer obviously is, "No." No one has all the gifts. No one can do all the work of the church. We need each other, that is the point he is making. These gifts, when they are being exercised, grow into offices. Notice how that which is listed as a gift in the beginning of the chapter has now become an office in the church at the end of it. Instead of having "gifts of healing," we speak of "healers," and instead of "gifts of administrations," we speak of "administrators." One grows into the other.

Paul then concludes it with this wonderful sentence:

But earnestly desire the higher gifts. {1 Cor 12:31a RSV}

That, by the way, is addressed to a congregation. It is in the plural; it is not addressed to individuals. Your gifts are chosen for you by the Holy Spirit, and no matter what you "desire," you are not going to get it unless the Holy Spirit has already chosen it for you. But, as a congregation, we can earnestly desire that the higher gifts be manifested among us. The higher ones, of course, are those that edify and help others. That is the purpose of the gifts.

Then he adds these words:

And I will show you a still more excellent way. {1 Cor 12:31b RSV}

That is the introduction to the great "love" chapter which is the essence of the fruit of the Spirit.

Now, there is a big difference between the gifts of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit is what God is after. That is the character of Christ coming through. The gifts are given to enable us to achieve in increasing degree, by mutual exercise, the fruit of the Spirit. But the fruit is what God is after, and every congregation should be infinitely more concerned with the fruit of the Spirit than they are with the gifts of the Spirit.

Prayer

We thank you, Father, that each one of us without exception who are part of the Body of Christ, whether we are children, young, old, male or female, bond or slave, rich or poor, have been given gifts by the Holy Spirit. We have all been baptized into one body; we have all been made to drink of one Spirit; we all have the same resource in Jesus Christ, and we thank you for that. We pray that on that basis we may fulfill our function in life to be an instrument of your working right in the scene where we live and work and fulfill our being. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: How the Body Works
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Studies in First Corinthians
Scripture: 1 Cor 12:12-31
Message No: 27
Catalog No: 3597
Date: January 7, 1979

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