



Showing the Body: Reflections on 1 Corinthians 12-13 for Epiphany

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Care for the body of Christ is a pastor's life. Like anxious parents, clergy watch over the membership of their congregations, gathering them, nurturing them, counting their fingers and toes. They are on the alert to note marks of growth and symptoms of disease. Are the members working well together? Do the brothers and sisters love each other? Do they know who they are? How are they doing in their struggle for space? Are they aggressive enough? Sensitive enough? Smart enough? Do they have the energy needed for the tasks thrust upon them? Is the list of inactives something to worry about? Is that pain in the lower body just from too much exercise, or a sign of real trouble?

A series of three lessons from the lectionary for Epiphany, Year C, offers a good opportunity for pastors to air these and other concerns having to do with church membership. From the twelfth and thirteenth chapters of 1 Corinthians, these texts contain some of Paul's most sensible and profound advice, given by a father to his beloved children in the faith (4:14-15). Confronted with what could be characterized as an adolescent outburst of enthusiasm among the Corinthian believers, he admonishes, encourages, and invites them to enter into an adult understanding of what it is to be the body of Christ. A series of sermons or adult education classes which develop his insights for our context can be an occasion for exploring the meaning of membership in the church, and deepening awareness of the grace of living in Christian community.

What it means, and what it takes to be the church, are lively questions today, perhaps even *the* question for the church in our generation. The issues of Christian identity and mission are raised forcefully by clergy and laity alike. The

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Second Vatican Council, the World Council of Churches, and numerous church mergers have produced a wealth of new reflections on ecclesiology. The civil rights movement in the 1960s, the anti-war movement of the '70s, and the "Moral Majority" of the '80s have each in its distinctive way pressed people in all denominations to reassess the relationship between church and society. Liberal and moderate Christians have been driven by the visibility and vigor of the conservative movement to ground themselves more adequately in Scripture and tradition, and to

develop from these resources a theology which supports involvement in the often divisive controversies of the public arena. Pastors and laity caught up in these expressions of Christian life are likely to be impatient with the more mundane tasks attendant upon maintaining congregations, while others perhaps long for the quieter days of cultural isolation in ethnic church communities. But all alike face the reality that the membership of congregations is being affected in noticeable and even dramatic ways. Competition for members' loyalty is intensely felt; within congregations, alienation between groups with divergent views is on the increase; pastors wear themselves out trying to keep up good relationships with all fronts; and continuing education courses on crisis management are recommended for pastors by ecclesiastical superiors who are worried about the impact of conflict upon the ability of the church to carry out its mission.

The following discussion of Paul's understanding of membership in the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12-13 is intended to stimulate reflections on both internal and external dimensions of the church's contemporary experience.

I. THE TROUBLE IN CORINTH

The second lessons for the second, third, and fourth Sundays in Epiphany are 1 Cor 12:1-11; 12:12-21, 26-27 (22-25 ought to be included in the reading, however, because a crucial point is made in these verses); and 12:27-13:13. Study in depth of the whole epistle will greatly help the interpreter to penetrate the meaning of these texts, but here it must suffice to note briefly the chief themes of the letter.

Paul wrote to the congregation at Corinth, it seems, in response to reports of sharp dissension among the believers. The nature of the conflicts has not been fully explained by modern scholarship, although the issues are clearly identified: rival loyalties to different evangelists, including Paul; the value of spiritual wisdom; lax morality; legal wrangling in pagan courts; the eating of food consecrated to idols; communal practices involving baptism, the Lord's Supper, and speaking in tongues; and the doctrine of the resurrection. No single hypothesis explains the eruption of this series of problems, but Gnostic influence has been detected in the concern for wisdom, and the difficulties surrounding spiritual gifts may be related to this factor as well. Much of the conflict can plausibly be attributed to a spontaneous response of a diverse group of people to the message of the gospel which had been delivered by Paul himself. Situated in one of the most important cities of Greece in the time of the early Roman Empire, the young congregation was undoubtedly made up of persons from a variety of sub-cultures—Jews and Greeks, slaves, freedmen, and a few of noble birth, the powerful as well as the weak, the wise as well as the simple, to

list the distinctions mentioned specifically by Paul (1:26-27; 12:13). The surrounding culture was certain to have been reflected in the conflicts troubling the congregation. Sources of disruption had to include sociological, political, and religious factors, as well as personal and theological differences. Gerd Theissen has argued, for example, that social stratification between rich and poor is involved in the dissension connected with baptism and the Lord's Supper.¹ Since Paul's preaching emphasized the equality of all parties in the Spirit (12:13), a certain amount of individualistic or party aggressiveness might have been expected, empowered by this message.

Paul, detecting this self-centeredness and partisanship (1:12-13, 22; 3:18; 10:23), thus writes to evoke and build up the sense of community that is to be theirs in the gospel.

After discussing a number of matters, with appropriate counsel provided, Paul moves in the twelfth and thirteenth chapters to support his instructions with some solid theological underpinning. Earlier he sought to show that God's work in history always conforms to the pattern of the cross (1:18-25). Now he deepens the understanding of God's work in reference to the reality of the church. In bold strokes centered on the activity of the Spirit, relationships in Christ's body, and the reality of God's love, Paul constructs a trinitarian constitution for the new community of faith.

Interpreting these lessons in this larger frame of reference can improve our perspective on portions of the letter that may be all too familiar to certain groups within American churches. Chapter 12, along with 14, is a crucial text for the charismatic movement, and its interpretation can itself be a source of dissension in congregations. Chapter 13, on the other hand, will be readily recognized as a text for wedding sermons—it is popular with those couples for whom profession of Christian commitment is for some reason uncomfortable—because of its seemingly general and romantic message. These uses—or better, misuses—of the texts in fact represent two very common views regarding the meaning of membership in the church. What kind of spiritual experience, it is asked, qualifies one for participation and leadership in the congregation? Isn't the church supposed to be an exclusive community, with clear lines of separation from the rest of society, drawn by such things as speaking in tongues and a strict moral code? Or is it an open community, in which all nice people are welcome? We are not recommending that either the charismatic movement or the question of Christian marriage for non-believers be made the central focus of these sermon studies, but the questions suggest the parameters of popular approaches to church membership, and can provide a good point of contact for the sermons or discussion. Both perspectives need to be transformed by careful consideration of the teaching covered in the two chapters of the letter included in the readings for the three Sundays.

II. UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN THE CONGREGATION

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany: 1 Cor 12:1-11. The Corinthian congregation,

¹Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia; Fortress, 1982) 54-59, 145-163.

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like others in the early church, had been powerfully blessed with gifts of the Spirit. Wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, tongues, and interpretation of tongues make up Paul's list here. Some of these gifts, or the Corinthians use of them, were of special concern to Paul. From chapter 2 we learn that the possession of wisdom seems to have led some to boast; here and in chapter 14 the problematic gift is that of tongues. Taken to be a demonstration of the believer's possession of special spiritual power, speaking in tongues had apparently become the mark of a spiritual elite within the congregation. Inequality in this gift was being taken by some to mean inequality in relationship to God. Modern experience of the charismatic movement is characterized by similar judgements.

Paul comes quickly to the heart of the issue. Ecstasy and other individual religious experiences are common to pagans and Christians alike. The distinctive mark of Christian

identity, however, whether ecstatic or otherwise, is the public confession that “Jesus is Lord.” This common confession is authorized by “one and the same Spirit” which also inspires the gifts distributed individually to believers, but always for the common good. The gifts to individuals, Paul wants to make clear, are therefore united both with respect to their source—the one Spirit—and in their purpose, namely, “for the common good” (12:7). The gift of faith which authorizes the confession also confers membership in a community which is finally the real recipient of the gifts which come through various individuals. The divine reality of the Spirit is from the beginning shared by all those who confess Jesus as Lord, and manifestations of this Spirit’s power cannot become a source of disunity, stratification, or alienation. Those who confess Christ become one body, with many members, each endowed with spiritual gifts (12:12).

Paul’s emphasis on the unity of the Corinthian congregation is very firm. But his intent is clearly not simply to urge the members to be more cohesive. On the contrary, he seeks to help them understand and acknowledge a dynamic unity which is already operative in their diversity: the distributed gifts are from the same Spirit; the corresponding services made by use of these gifts are for the same Lord; and the entire operation is in each instance inspired by the same God. Unity is given and sustained through the sequence (gifts, services, operation) by the integrity of the divine relationship (Spirit, Lord, God). Unity is given, and can be acknowledged and enjoyed, but it is not generated by the initiative of the congregation itself. Paul’s chief concern is clear: the members of the Corinthian congregation, which had no ethnic, social, or political bonds and could therefore be easily polarized and fragmented by ecstatic experiences, needed to appropriate the unity which was theirs in God’s action upon them.

The import of this lesson for our contemporary context should also be quite clear. In a society in which bonds of family, ethnic group, and local community are regularly broken by the geographical and social mobility of the people, a sense of the church as community does not come easily. Indeed, because of the powerful emphasis on individual achievement endemic to our culture, congregations are commonly regarded as being held together by individuals with special spiritual endowments, and so tend to take on the characteristic traits of those individuals. The power of television evangelism’s personalities to

set the standard for pastoral leadership in many local congregations would not be nearly as problematic as it is were it not for the existence of this cultural pattern of individualism. As is well known, people shop for a pastor with the gift regarded as most important, sometimes breaking strong ties to their home congregations to establish this personal relationship. Commitment to the congregation is also often understood to be primarily, if not only, a matter of personal loyalty to the pastor, which encourages pastors within staff ministries and between congregations to compete with each other for this loyalty. Each pastor seeks to present to his or her public a more or less distinctive spiritual “style,” and to gather around him or her a group of sympathetic supporters who constitute the elite insiders of congregational leadership. The spoken or unspoken assumption of superiority vested in one particular spiritual gift soon provokes envy, dissension, and fragmentation in the community. Those with other gifts feel left out, and perhaps soon opt out, to find the preacher or priest that matches their individual gifts.

Paul’s understanding of Christian community runs directly counter to this typical pattern. By emphasizing one gift over others, the power of every other gift to build up the church is

diminished. On the other hand, when all gifts are held equally to manifest the one Spirit who authorizes a common confession of Jesus as Lord, and to empower service to a common good, a more genuine and full community in the Spirit can be realized. In the context of American culture, an exclusive church with a homogeneous membership gathered around a strong leader with a distinctive spiritual gift—whether tongues, prophesy, teaching, social ministry, or charming hospitality—may be more successful in the competition for members because of its match with the cultural selective principle, but it will not provide for the participating membership the experience which Paul regards as characteristic. The church is called to manifest an inclusive Spirit in every aspect of its life. No gift can be discouraged or refused by the leadership, nor its bearer excluded from the membership. All Christians have spiritual gifts, and all rightfully can expect to have these gifts put to use in the community. Getting this done can be a complex and difficult task, of course. Spiritual gifts are deeply grounded in distinctive characteristics of personality and culture. To use all available gifts for the common good requires, for example, that social space be made available for diverse sub-cultures and “odd” individuals. Leadership opportunities must be open for both women and men. Minority groups must have the same opportunities as the majority. And all parties thus empowered must faithfully aim at the common good. Not even Paul had come to terms with the full implications of his own teaching. Without the acknowledgment of the unifying presence of the same Spirit in the confession of Jesus as Lord, the task is probably impossible.

III. THE ANATOMY OF MEMBERSHIP

The Third Sunday After the Epiphany: 1 Cor 12:12-27. We have seen that the church is a community which comes into being by the action of God in the Spirit. One of the difficulties for us in appropriating the reality of this community is that in the modern context spiritual reality is commonly regarded as separate from bodily

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or material things. Spiritual community consequently is held to be an essentially *invisible* reality, without substantive purchase or power in the world of matter. Hence power for the community to make a real difference in human society seems not to be available, or at least minimal; experience of the community is oddly personal and private.

Use of these texts in the Epiphany season provides an occasion to counter this view vigorously. The church, Paul teaches, is to be a visible manifestation of the presence of God. Constituted by the Spirit in the uniting confession of Jesus as Lord, the church is the Lord's body. “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” (12:12). It is important to underscore that “body” is not merely a metaphor for the spiritual community which serves to make a point about the internal integration of the parts or members into a harmonious whole. As the *body* of Christ, the church does have concrete, visible, effective presence in the human realm of embodied selves and social structures. It is also important to note that Paul does not write “...so it is with the *church*.” The exchange of a Christological reference for the expected ecclesiological one indicates a significant shift in Paul's focus at this point. The bodily union of which the members are a part is that union established by baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus (12:13). The union is not like just any other social body, but is rather that eschatological reality in which

Jews and Greeks, slave and free, stand equally before God. It is a body in which the usual ordering of relationships has been transformed. Membership in this body therefore differs in very important ways from membership in other human communities.

How membership in Christ's body is different becomes clear when Paul's use of the metaphor is compared with other uses in ancient literature. For example, Livy reports that Menenius Agrippa (ca. 494 B.C.E.) employed it to persuade mutinous Roman *plebs* that their interests were so bound up with those of the patricians in the civic union that they could not withdraw their services. Stoics also likened the ordered universe to a body, of which the citizen is a well behaved member: one should act "as the hand or the foot would do if they had reason and understood the natural order." And Gnostic teaching contains the notion that the universe is a body ruled by mind or reason; humans ought to act as one body in accordance with one mind.² These uses of the metaphor share a markedly hierarchical structure, as is commonly the case in subsequent political thought in western culture. The metaphor serves to undergird traditional, authoritarian political discipline. While Paul's usage seems superficially to do so, too, in as much as he seeks to restrain excessive enthusiasm by commitment to the common good, in actual fact his interest is in radically restructuring community in conformity with God's gracious love. The point is not that Christ's body ought to conform to natural law or the rule of reason; on the contrary, it is God who has arranged the parts of the body "*as he chose*" (12:18), so that "the members may have the same care for one another" (12:25). In Christ's body, the eye (normally the naturally superior part) cannot say to the hand (inferior part), "I have no need of you," nor the head (superior) to the feet (inferior) (12:21). In

²Charles Kingsley Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) 287.

Christ's body, the weaker parts are acknowledged as indispensable, the less honorable parts receive greater honor, and the really unrepresentable parts, for which we feel shame, are modestly clothed (12:22-23)—i.e., our sin is covered by the garment of Christ's righteousness (cf. Gen 3:21). In place of the "normal" ordering in which the mighty lord it over the weak, in Christ's body the strong serve the weak, the superior help the inferior, and all suffer and rejoice together (12:26). How much closer Paul's picture of the human body is to our experience of our bodies, compared with the abstract orderings of the Hellenistic images! The pattern of relationship in Christ's body, although an eschatological reality, is like how things *really* are with us!

What are some implications of this for membership in the church? The real church is not invisible and purely spiritual. The church is an embodied spiritual community with the distinctive anatomical structure given it by God in Jesus Christ. If one is truly a member of this community, there is no way to detach oneself from that structure; 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 apart of the body (12:15-16). Any attempt to separate oneself out must ultimately fail. To have a personal relationship with Christ is to be part of his body. Like it or not, everyone has to learn to live with the smell! Belonging to the body is to feel all its pains, share its hungers, know its limits, suffer in its illnesses, dance its liturgies, feed its growth, breathe its spirit, expect its healing, die its death, and hope for its resurrection. All these things members of the body do together and for each other. And meanwhile God continues to arrange and rearrange the organs according to needs of

the whole. The church is a living, changing body, an evolving structure selected so as to be God's epiphany in the public space of every time and place. New members with new gifts serve in new ways, adding new powers to the frame. And yet, as changed as it may become, the church is still always the body of Christ or, to borrow an insight from the third of our lessons, the body of love which endures forever.

IV. THE BODY OF LOVE AND ITS POWER

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany: 1 Cor 12:27-13:13. Membership in the church is community in the Spirit. This community has a bodily presence in the world that takes a Christic structure. To be sure, individual congregations differ greatly with respect to the transparency of this structure in their activities. The epiphany which the church is will be correspondingly dim or bright, weak or powerful. "Epiphany watchers" of our times are in any case well advised *not* to look for the spectacular or the obvious. Intense religious experiences such as speaking in tongues or miraculous healings, for example, do not in and of themselves constitute a sign of authentic membership. Nor, we must hasten to add, does a highly self-conscious "Christian" identity as defined by high views of biblical authority, strict fidelity to doctrinal or liturgical tradition, or moralistic and ascetic separation from the secular realm. While these features of Christian life are in some degree helpful and even necessary, none of them can be made to be definitive of genuine membership in the body of Christ. Why this is so, and what the truly decisive feature of membership is, Paul discloses in the last of our three lessons, the famous "hymn to love."

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Such seemingly obvious marks of membership in Christ's body are not decisive in Paul's view for basically two reasons. First, although such spiritual gifts are given to be used for the common good, they are not given to all equally. "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers?" (12:28-30). They may therefore become the source of disruption and division in the body, as was the case in Corinth, and is the situation made normative by modern denominationalism. Thus speaking in "tongues of angels" as well as of humans can be no better for the community than the "noisy gong or clanging cymbal" used in pagan worship (13:1). So also an individual person's (and by extension, a separate denomination's) knowledge of revelation or theological learning may similarly amount to nothing in relationship to the reality of Christ's body. This is true even of the power to do miracles and the most extreme forms of ascetic discipline: if they do nothing for the common good of the body, they cannot be made constitutive of membership, in it. When individual persons or congregations make these gifts their own special, distinctive possession—note the staccato emphasis on "If I..." in 13:1-3—they are without good effect in the body, and are consequently nothing to take account of (13:2-2). They do not endure, and it is the *sine qua non* of the body of Christ as the eschatological community that it and the powers that constitute it endure, even beyond the end of this age.

What, then, does endure? Love endures, Paul writes; faith and hope endure also, "but the greatest of these is love" (13:13). Why the greatest? Because it is love which "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." All other spiritual gifts are grounded in this one, which is "more excellent" than all the others (12:31). This is the second reason why the other gifts cannot be determinative of authentic membership in the body; without love the other gifts are unbound, roving in wild freedom, in opposition and rebellion to the common good of the

body. Love is the power which holds the gifts and their recipients to the common good of the community, and when it is present, those who know how to look for it recognize the difference it makes: “Love is patient. and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right” (13:4-6).

The presence of love is marked in modest ways, and appearances in this case are not deceptive. Although modest in presentation, love is nonetheless the epiphany of God. The flow of love is like the blood which sustains the human body, a quiet presence absolutely necessary for the life it feeds. It is hard to know what the world would be like without it, because we have no instance of its absence. Its constant presence makes it nearly invisible. Hence the importance of the drama of its seeming absence in the death of Jesus: in the resurrection and the restoration of community with him, the appearance of its absence is transformed into an eschatological guarantee of its enduring presence. Love is the “power of this world which already as such is the power of the world to come.”³ To be a member of Christ’s body is to be bound up in this power, and to be a participant in its epiphany for our time.

³Ibid., 305. The words are from Ernst Troeltsch.