

Members Of The Body

In my lesson last week I pointed out that the Scriptures do not speak of “members of the church.” I reasoned that an organization has members, but the saved people are not an organization. In this effort we will consider that the Scriptures do speak of “members of the body.” It may offer some surprising insights.

Addressing the Corinthian disciples, Paul stated, “*Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it*” (1 Cor. 12:27). In verses 12-13, he had written, “*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....*” So, he definitely speaks of members of the body.

Paul identifies the body with Christ and also with the church. “... *Christ is the head of the church, the body, and is himself its Savior*” (Eph. 5:23). Also, “... *for the sake of his body, that is, the church*” (Col. 1:24). So, if the body has members and the body is the church, are we not forced to conclude that the church has members? Not exactly.

Do the saved have two identities -- as both a church and a body? No. The saved ones, the “ekklesia,” are designated in our translations as the church. That is what they are. They are not literally the body of Christ. That is a figure of speech, a metaphor, even as they are called figuratively a temple, the house of God, and the household of faith. The functioning of the saved ones (the “ekklesia,” more accurately translated “assembly or congregation”) in unity is compared to a body with various members that perform work in harmony in different capacities.

The functioning of a body is not the working of an organization like a business, a labor union, or an army. I suspect that most congregational leaders have such organizational models in mind for their groups. These organizations operate through an authoritative system with its “chain of command” giving work assignments and rules to be followed, but that is not the way a body functions. Disciples all have the same accountability to Christ who is the head. They are not accountable to any superior disciple, either for assignment of function or exercise of it. Efforts to make a body operate like an organized business usually make it burdensome, oppressive, and less fruitful.

Let me recall some points I formerly taught about the members of the body. (You have heard them or taught them also.). Paul gave us the ammunition for our broadsides. “*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. 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? But God so adjusted 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. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together*” (1 Cor. 12:14-26). For the sake of brevity, some of this familiar passage is

omitted. Now, listen to the application that you have heard from us all. Do you detect a flaw in it?

We explain the different capabilities disciples have. Maybe you cannot fill our pulpit but you can usher. If you cannot lead singing you can still serve by cleaning the building. Though you are incapable of teaching a class, your function may be to pass out bulletins or song books or pass communion trays. Maybe you cannot lead a public prayer but you can come early and turn on the heat and lights and keep the baptistery ready. It is not needful that you give communion comments in order to serve, but you may be able to keep the nursery. All of these functions add to the harmonious working of the body.

Is that what Paul taught? Nay, verily!! Then where is the flaw in my application?

Read the next verses (v. 27-30). *“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. 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?”*

Was Paul giving instructions to congregations in Oregon, Alabama, or even good ol’ Texas? Definitely not! Does your congregation have apostles, prophets, and persons filling all those capacities mentioned? I think not! Neither did the church in Corinth have them all. When he said they were the body, he did not indicate that their group was the whole body.

Paul introduces Chapter 12 with *“Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be uninformed.”* This chapter is dealing with “last days” spiritual gifts. Those gifts were given *“.. so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (1 Cor. 1:7-8). Those spiritual gifts were intended only until the “parousia.” They were in the body at large facilitating the covenantal transition..

It is clear and of great importance to recognize that Paul was referring to the universal body of Christ rather than an individual congregation of God’s people. Our lack of perception of this illustrates shockingly how “organizationally minded” we have allowed ourselves to become. And most shocking of all is the ingrained concept we have of centering our spiritual work in an organized congregation to be performed in a building at certain times of meeting. Our function should be in whole life service rather than only in segments at designated times in assemblies. True, some of your talent may be used profitably in assemblies but your greater private ministry is more effective outside of the organized system.

Our persistent conflicts and causes of divisions mostly relate to assemblies. We are trapped in a mindset that the exercise of our gifts -- our abilities, time, and money -- be assigned by the elders or church organization, that our money be given into the treasury, and that our time and energy be centered in “church work.” Paul was teaching no such a system. Such an arrangement makes the disciple subject to men rather than to Christ.

One of the freedoms we have in Christ is to “do our own thing,” that is, to use the gift, talent, ability -- however you wish to term it -- in private ministry in our daily life.

What constructive thing can you do best, enjoy doing, and gain satisfaction from doing? That is your gift. Whom must you consult and gain permission from to use it? No one. Maybe your gift is to work with teenagers. You can give your time, money, energy, and devotion to them in your home individually or in groups without asking anybody. The Lord has told you to do it by his giving you the gift without regard to gender! You need no group to pay you to do it. The organized church may never recognize your gift. It often quenches the Spirit by its bureaucratic system.

Our congregations have never had a consistent policy concerning female roles, and there are constant hassles about their use in assemblies. Women are free, however, to work in the capacity of their endowment in private ministry without asking anyone about it. There is no role of service to others that is off limits because of gender. As a private ministry, she may evangelize both men and women. If she uses her resources to conduct a public teaching program -- even a radio or television program -- who can deny her that freedom?

She is simply a member of the universal body who is functioning according to her gift.

If you are a musician, artist, writer, filmmaker, teacher, psychologist, psychiatrist, nurse, therapist, physician, mechanic, carpenter, or whatever, you can dedicate those abilities to serving others even while making your own living through use of those gifts also. That's what Paul did as a tentmaker. If others see your valuable service and wish to become partners financially or in practice, that is their prerogative, even as the Philippian disciples helped Paul, and Silas worked with him. One need not “give to the Lord” into the church treasury and then have to request help from the church in exercising these gifts. A disciple may serve in both private ministry and congregational service at the same time.

I am not suggesting that private ministries operate out of disdain for the congregation with which one assembles. The group should encourage such ministries rather than considering them suspect. Yes, that would mean that less money would be given to organized religion with its expensive real estate and hired personnel, but the disciples would be functioning more effectively and harmoniously. Really, one has to “search the Scriptures” to justify a pattern for church property, hired ministers (except for special elders), and a regular collection into a church treasury to pay for them. I know that must sound shocking and outrageous to many of you. You would not allow it from your pulpit but, since this is my private ministry, you cannot fire me! It is great to be free!

Then, why have assemblies? They are intended for mutual edification. Most of the capacities filled in our customary assemblies are honorary capacities more than “working for the Lord!” I will cover some of these related issues later, if the Lord wills. Thanks for your gracious toleration of me and my writings.

(Cecil Hook; August 2003) []