

Members of one body!!
Romans 12:1-21
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Paul's letter to the Romans is the most comprehensive summary of the Christian message, the Gospel, in the Bible.

Sunday mornings, we're making our way through it; we've arrived at chapter 12, where the apostle Paul moves from message, doctrine, theory (chapters 1-11) to practice, to how we are to joyfully live out the Good News in our daily lives (chapters 12-16).

And we cannot but help notice that the first way Paul applies the Gospel is in the church, among one another. Paul will explain how believers are to obey the government in chapter 13, but then immediately return, again, to relationships between believers.

What's he telling us? That the local church is not an optional extra for everyone who claims to be a follower of Jesus, the church is the first, even the main place we live out the Gospel, as we serve, love, forgive one another.

So be prepared to hear a lot about the local church in the weeks to come.

The New Testament uses three illustrations to describe the church.

The church is *like a family*, we're brothers and sisters in Christ, adopted into God's family, with God our Father and Jesus our "elder brother."

What's the key idea here? Our love and care for one another—just as we would naturally care for our blood brothers and sisters, so we are to love one another. A Christian friend of mine who was brought up in an unbelieving home was puzzled when she came to church because everyone was calling everyone else "sister" "brother" - she thought, "Are they all related to one another?!" Well yes, in spiritual bonds of love, they belong to the only eternal family, God's family, which transcends time and culture.

The church is like *a building*, a temple, we are living stones and Jesus is the cornerstone, the capstone. What's the key idea behind this image? The physical temple of Old Testament days is gone! The place God used to "dwell", "live" has been replaced by his people, you and I are together the temple of the living God. Where does God live today? Not in buildings of brick and stone, not in fancy cathedrals, he lives among his people. "When two or three are gathered in my name" said Jesus, Matthew 18, "there I am with them." It's a wonderful truth, Jesus Christ is present with us, by his Spirit, here, now!

The third image of the church is the one we find in Romans 12 (and many other parts of the NT), *the body*.

The Image of the Body

Paul says that every Christian needs to adopt a new identity, a new way of thinking about themselves. You and I are to think of ourselves as part of a body, as an arm, a foot, an eye, an ear.

The glorious and loving head of the body is Christ, think, perhaps of the human brain, who through his Word and by his Spirit controls, directs and empowers the whole, and we are the body of Christ, each one of us a limb, a muscle, a leg, a hand, an ear, a hand, or a foot:

“For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”

Romans 12:4-5

And this morning, God helping us we want to explore the meaning of this third image: what does it mean in practice to begin thinking “I’m an eye”, “I’m a hand”, “I’m an ear?”

Of all the three images (family, temple, body) this one for sure is the fullest, the most explanatory— and the most visual because we all live in a body made up of many parts, “for just as each of us has one body with many members.” Every moment of every day we live with an “aide memoire,” our bodies, “I see, this is how I am to think about myself, I’m a hand, an eye, an ear, a foot.”

Do you have a little book of Heavenly Questions? Puzzles you would like to ask in heaven? One of mine is this: When you designed the human body, did you have, as your pattern, the church? Because I am quite sure that the Church came before Creation, because Ephesians 1:4 tells us that we were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. So first of all God had in mind the Church, and then one day he formed Adam and Eve. If that’s the case, then perhaps our bodies are designed by God to be everyday reminders of how we are to think of ourselves in the church. This body image teaches us five truths about ourselves and our relationships towards one another.

(1) We belong to one another

“For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”

Every part of the body belongs to every other part of the body, v. 5. Each part is not only literally connected to all the others parts, it, belongs to the rest of the body. The eye belongs to ears, hands, feet, arms.

The eye is designed to belong to the rest of the body. It’s not designed to function on it’s own, it’s designed to function as one part of a much larger whole.

Immanuel Kant was one of the leading thinkers of what is called the Age of Enlightenment, 1700s, and he urged people in the West to trust their own thinking, and not rely on anyone else. “Dare to know” was the motto of the day. The enlightenment (which from a Christian point of view, brought more darkness than light) unleashed a wave of individualism into our culture—think and do your own thing, don’t worry about the impact of your actions on others. And you and I who live in the West are products of the Enlightenment whether we know it or accept it or not. We tend to think of ourselves individuals, all on our own, we view society as an archipelago of tiny islands dotted around an ocean. We need to repent of this unchristian idea. We need to see ourselves as parts of a body which belong to one another.

(2) We have different gifts

Truth number 2: We have different gifts, verse 6: “we have different gifts according to the grace given us.” Flows immediately from the image of the body, we have eyes that see—that’s their role, ears that hear, that’s their task, hands that knit and sweep and cook and drive, that’s what hands do, and so on. We should expect different gifts in the church. God-willing we’ll explore that next Sunday. We should not expect everyone to have the same gift! Imagine a body made up of just eyes, just ears, just feet, grotesque! I remember a sister in Christ who loved to pray, prayed faithfully, and had the time and desire to pray, once telling me but then she was so disappointed that other people in the church didn’t share the same passion for prayer! Ah, but that’s like an ear saying “I wish everyone could hear” or an eye saying “I wish everyone can see.” Don’t expect everyone to have your gift!

(3) We need one another

Since we are only one part, we need each other. Paul writes a lot more about this body image in 1 Corinthians chapter 12, verse 21 reads:

*“The eye cannot say to the hand,
I don’t need you!”*

Eyes can’t sweep the floor or drive the car, so they need hands which can. And in the same way hands can’t see where the broom or floor or road is without the eyes.

Since you and I are so limited, since we are all mere one-trick ponies, we desperately need one another! I’ve got gifts that you don’t have so you need me, and you have gifts that I don’t have so I need you!

See how the image of a body goes against the idea of the self-sufficient “me in my small corner and you in yours” Christianity? All I need is “Jesus and me” and I’ll fine. No, says Paul, since you are just one part you need everyone else. Can I put it this way: have you ever seen an eyeball locomoting down the street all on its own? No! It cannot survive on its own. Have you ever seen an ear, a hand, a leg locomoting down the street on it’s own? The very idea is preposterous. The only body parts we will ever find on their own, are, let me put it starkly, dead ones.

(4) We affect one another

Since we are all connected to one another we affect one another. If an eye opens the body sees, if an eye closes the body can't see. When Usain Bolt used to run like the wind, every muscle, every sinew, every ligament of his body worked together to achieve the one aim: fastest man.

But suppose you were walking down the high street and your arm just decided to wave around wildly, do its own thing! The rest of the body would be impacted! Your other arm would immediately have to compensate to balance the body; in fact the whole of your body may have to stop in the street to prevent falling over.

Are you and I aware that our behaviour affects everyone else, for good or for harm? For encouragement or discouragement?

Remember how some Christians in the church at Corinth brought tons of food to their love feasts and scoffed it all completely ignoring a poor family on the next table, who had meagre rations. They were completely unaware of the hurt, the embarrassment, the pain they were causing to their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Are you and I aware that because we are all connected to one another, that whatever we do ripples across the whole community?

We need to recover a view of spiritual maturity that runs beyond how many years we have been in the faith how much doctrine we might know, and measures how aware I am of my impact on my brothers and sisters. Am I an encouragement or a discouragement to them?

(5) We serve one another

With the gifts God has given us, we'll leave that to next week. Find your special gift and use it to build up your brothers and sisters.

Conclusion

This, brothers and sisters is our new identity in Christ. We are each of us, parts of the body of Christ. What a privilege that we belong to him and to one another. Let us learn to respond to God's Word in our understanding and behaviour in view of God's mercy to us, which is the theme of our next song:

When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of glory died.