

There are many ways to speak about the differences between people. One might speak in terms of the personality. There are extroverts and introverts; detail oriented people and big-picture people; there are some who like the numbers and others who like words; some who are reserved with their emotions and others who wear their emotions on their sleeve; some who like to work primarily with their hands and some with their minds; some who like to lead, and others to follow. Some who like the cold and some who like it warm.

Of course there are other kinds of differences. There are many different cultural and ethnic varieties; European, Asian (everything from Israel and Turkey in the West to China and Japan in the East), and Africa, and the Americas, with all the varieties that are here, most of us a kind of mix.

And there are political differences: Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and liberals, Libertarians and Socialists; there are environmentalists and animal lovers, anti-abortion and choice, gay rights and traditionalists; some who don't really know and some who just don't want to argue about it (that's me).

There are socio-economic differences that we sometimes think of in terms of class: the poor, the

middle class, the rich; the workers, skilled and unskilled, more educated, less educated, city and country dwellers.

And we should not forget religious variety. There are the seculars (sometimes called humanists), nones, spiritual but not religious (that's what they think). There are the great faiths: Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, plus an astonishing array of lesser known religions. Also the variety of Christians; Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, Evangelical. To break it down even further; Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Congregationalist, Episcopalian, Assembly of God, Disciples of Christ, and more besides.

Even among Baptists the variety is astonishing: Southern and American Baptists, General Baptists, General Association of Regular Baptists, United Baptist Fellowship, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, 7th Day Baptists, Swedish Baptists, and thousands of self-described Independent Baptists. It is all enough to take one's breath away.

Corinth

In Corinth, the divide that Paul spoke about was also multifaceted. There were the factions: Apollos, Peter, Paul, even a Jesus faction. And there were the gifts,

spiritual gifts as we often call them. For the people in Corinth there were several mentioned by name: prophecy, tongues, wisdom, knowledge, faith, interpretation. All of these were the result of the gift of the Holy Spirit, whose coming is celebrated on this Sunday, which is called Pentecost, because of the miracle of speech 50 days after the Passover at which Jesus was crucified.

If I may say, not meaning to judge or condescend; the Christians there in Corinth, not unlike those in other places; were behaving like children. They were not being childlike, which can be viewed in a positive way, but childish. Paul told them as much in 1 Corinthians 3 when he told them they were only ready for milk, not solid food. Frankly, that has been an appropriate criticism of Christians ever since; largely pre-occupied with their own situations, their own spiritual health, their own needs. That childishness, to be sure, is at the heart of many of our divisions.

What Paul gave them was a reference to a miracle; one that applies not only to the narrow question of spiritual gifts but also to many other questions raised by the spiritual life, and life in general. He used the metaphor of the body; one unit, many parts. Paul writes, "all these are the work of one and the same Spirit." It is a powerful image.

## The Body of Christ

He goes to some length to tell them what should be obvious. He explains the metaphor to make sure they get it. He says that the foot is not less a part of the body because it is not a hand, nor an ear because it is not an eye. He even envisions the absurd, abstract art, idea of the whole body as an eye or an ear. One can expand. What if the whole body was a foot, how would one send a tweet. Or if the whole body was an elbow, how could one do the grocery shopping?

The body is a miracle, all the parts assembled together in a way that makes them one, one integrated self. Paul goes on to speak of the way the parts of the body are inter-dependent, of the less presentable being given greater attention, about how there is no division in the body, how if one part is in pain, the whole body is in pain. If one part is honored, the whole rejoices.

And then he delivers the punch line; "*now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.*"

## Narrow Interpretation

Now if one wants to take the narrow view, it is possible to say that the metaphor of the body only applies to the actual spiritual gifts mentioned here and *not* to any of the other ways we speak of the differences between

us: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing the spirits, tongues, interpretation. Later Paul mentions apostles, prophets, teachers, workers of miracles, healers, helpers, administrators. If we take this view then for the most part we would say it applies to the organizational life of the church and to our relationships to our more pentecostal brothers and sisters. Certainly there is meaning enough in this kind of interpretation.

Given, however, that earlier Paul had addressed the factions and other differences, and that he goes on to say, "And now I will show you the most excellent way," and then delivers his great essay on divine, unselfish, love, we are forced to the conclusion that a broader interpretation is warranted and the metaphor of the body *must* be applied to all the diversity present within the larger Christian, human community.

### The Broader View

The broader view is not only more suggestive and powerful, it is also more problematic, and there is the ever-present temptation to retreat from it, because of its implications.

That in this miracle of the Body of Christ, all the human diversity is included, and what often seems like the most uncomfortable contradictions are overcome.

Personality type does not matter, neither does ethnic background, physical aptitude, social or economic class, education level, party affiliation or views on political issues; each one of you is a part of the Body of Christ. On that basis everyone is welcome.

Challengingly, the ones we experience as different, too different, maybe even too offensive to be included, well, they are a part of the body too. We are not in charge of who is included. It is not up to us. We are forced to admit that some of the people who, if it were up to us, would be excluded, have in fact been included, and in order to accept them and one another, we must seek the more excellent way.

"The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts, there is only one body. So it is with Christ! For we were all baptized by one spirit - into one body - Jews and Greeks (and that means everybody: slave or free (and that means everyone too) - and we were all given one spirit.

Maybe the most important lesson we have all failed to learn from this text is that we are all in this together, we all depend on one another:

The leaders and the followers  
The colds and the hots'  
The I's and the E's

The liberals and the conservatives  
The men and the women  
The blacks and the whites  
The gays and the straights  
The establishment and the tea party  
You get the idea, make your own list

We can't just dismiss one another. When we do, the Church, the world doesn't work, just like our bodies won't work if we neglect the care of any of its parts. God has locked us all in a room, a room called Earth. In the end, either all of us will make it, or none of us will. That is the way the gospel works.

This image speaks a challenge to us, because it forces us to accept the unacceptable. It also speaks a great good news message to us, because it tells us, each one, that we are welcome in God's family.

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