

1 COR 12.12-26: LET'S CARE FOR ONE ANOTHER

[Chelmsford 7 March 2010]

This morning I want to preach on one of the five key purposes of our church: namely our duty to care for one another. Do you know the other four purposes?

Let me quote from our church development plan: "*The overall aim of our church is based on the 'Great Commandment' (Matt 22.37-40) and the 'Great Commission' (Matt 28.18-20). This overall aim breaks down into five 'purposes': **worship, evangelism, care for one another, growth in the faith, & service to others***"

We go on to say: "*We want our church to be not just purpose-driven, but passion-driven. We want to be a dynamic community of faith, having an impact on our town for Christ. Or to put it another way, we want to be a church on fire for God – and in turn a church setting fire to the hearts of the congregation, crowd and community. To that end we want to see our church become a community of **inspired worshippers, effective evangelists, supportive members, intentional learners, & selfless volunteers***"

This term we are looking at these five key purposes in the light of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians:

- Last Sunday was Ministry Sunday. I therefore preached on 1 Cor 12.4-11 and looked at our call to be *selfless volunteers*.
- Next Sunday is a communion service, and in that context I am preaching on 1 Cor 10.16-17 and hopefully encouraging you to become a congregation of *inspired worshippers*.
- Today, I am preaching on 1 Cor 12.12-26 and looking at our duty of care for one another – we want to become a community of *supportive members*.

So, with that preamble, let me begin with a fascinating definition a Baptist church. An American Baptist in a book on Baptist identity wrote: "*The church is a people with a double promise. First, they have promised to follow Jesus as Lord of their lives. They have promised, secondly, to help each other struggle to follow Jesus as Lord*" (WB Shurden, *The Baptist Identity* 35)

What a helpful definition of church membership!

As members of the church of Jesus we have made a double promise – a promise to Jesus, and a promise to our fellow members.

Let's turn to 1 Cor 12.12-26 and see what the Apostle Paul has to say about our duty of care for one another. Within the context of talking about the church as the body of Christ Paul makes three major statements: viz. We need one another; we differ from one another; and God wants us to care for one another.

1. WE NEED ONE ANOTHER

"The body itself is not made up of only one part, but of many parts" (v14)

Peterson, *The Message*: "*A body isn't just a single part blown up into something huge. It's all the different-but-similar parts arranged and functioning together*".

You don't have to have a GCSE in human biology to understand that fact about the body. A body consisting of a single organ - a giant eyeball, perhaps, or one single, massive toenail or knee - would be grotesque. It would be a monstrosity.

It would be a freak of nature.

The fact is that the body requires the contribution of each member.

All members have a necessary part to play.

Paul was writing to a church where not everybody felt valued. At Corinth some members felt themselves inferior to others, while others felt themselves superior to the rest.

- Paul begins by addressing himself to *those who felt inferior*: "**If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not keep it from being a part of the body. And if the ear would say, 'Because I am not an eye, I don't belong to the body', that would not keep it from being a part of the body**" (vv15-16). Here is a word of encouragement to those who feel sidelined and marginalised.
- But then Paul addresses *those who felt superior*: "**The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you!' Nor can the head say to the feet, 'Well I don't need you'**" (21). Here is a word of rebuke to those who feel self-sufficient.

Who were these superior Christians?

The immediate context of 1 Cor 12 & 14 suggests that the superior Christians were people who were into some of the more spectacular gifts of the Spirit - while the inferior Christians were those who failed to speak in tongues or cast out demons. Alas, in recent years there have been parallels in some churches today - where so-called charismatics have been tempted to look down on those lesser mortals who, in their terms, have not been "*baptized in the Spirit*".

But it is possible that Paul also had in mind social divisions in the church.

We learn from 1 Cor 11, that some of the richer members were tucking into their food without waiting for the poor to turn up. These well-to-do and more educated people no doubt felt themselves superior to those at the lower end of the social scale.

I find it significant that Paul in 1 Cor 12.13 states not just that "**all of us have been baptized into the one body**", but he goes on to elaborate this statement and says: "all of us, whether "**Jews or Gentiles, whether slaves or free**", have been baptized into the one body.

Sadly in many a church social divisions have been a reality: in my first church, when I first arrived, the women sat on one side of the church, whereas the ladies - who always wore hats - sat on the other!

In this context of division Paul says: we all need one another.

No member is more important than another.

Look at v18: "**God put every different part in the body just as he wanted it to be**". I.e. Each member is there by divine placement!

What is more, "**we cannot do without the parts of the body that seem to be weaker; and those parts that we think aren't worth very much are the ones which we treat with greater care; while the parts of the body which don't look very nice are treated with special modesty, which the more beautiful parts do not need**" (vv22-24)

Paul here is somewhat euphemistically referring to the sexual organs of the body - the fact that they are not on public display, doesn't mean that they haven't got an important part to play!

Likewise, the fact that some members of the church have not got an upfront role, does not mean that they have not an important part to play.

My mind, for instance, goes to some of our older members, who day by day intercede for the work of the church. Their praying may not be seen, but that doesn't mean to say that it is any less important a contribution.

Indeed such an unspectacular service should be accorded the greatest of respect.

2. WE DIFFER FROM ONE ANOTHER

v20: "**There are many parts but one body**".

Just as in your body and mine we have all kinds of body parts with all kinds of functions - to use the categories employed by Paul we have "**eyes and ears, hands and feet**" - so too within the church.

Indeed, the church is only the church in so far as that variety of gifting and personality is present. The church of God is, by definition a heterogeneous body.

We are not all cast in the same mould - thank God.

True, we all need to share one common confession of faith - we all need to be able to declare that "**Jesus is Lord**". But thereafter, the more differences, the better.

The church of God, if it is to reflect the diversity of the Creator, is called to be a broad church. In the words of one commentator: "*Instead of allowing ourselves to be cast in any one mould, we ought to relish the differences & learn to capitalize on them*" (Prior). The more diverse a church, the more it truly reflects the body of Christ. Something would be wrong with us as a church if we were, for instance, a church just for families, or a church just for whites, or a church just for the middle-class.

Sadly there are many churches where the body has effectively lost several limbs by social, cultural or intellectual amputation.

But if we are to be the body of Christ, then we need to be the kind of church where

- both the traditionalists and the radical feel at home
- both those left of centre and those right of the political centre feel free to be themselves;
- charismatics feel free to express their love for the Lord, but also the questioning Thomas' of this world find acceptance too.

This is not easy. Churches made up of people of one theological standpoint or social level are much more comfortable than churches made up of people from very different backgrounds and very different approaches to the Gospel.

3. WE ARE TO CARE FOR ONE ANOTHER

"God himself has put the body together in such a way, so that...all its different parts have the same care for one another. If one part of the body suffers, all parts suffer with it; if one part is praised, all the other parts share its happiness" (vv25-26). As members of the body of Christ we are to care for one another - but how?

1. *Be concerned for others*

One way of showing our care is that we are "*anxious*" for one another. Indeed, the word translated 'care' is often used in the NT with negative connotation: e.g..

- 1 Cor 7.32: **"I want you to be free from anxieties"**
- Phil 4.6: **"Do not worry (lit: be anxious) about anything"**
- Matt 6.34: **"Do not worry about tomorrow"**

But while we are not to be anxious for ourselves, we are to be anxious - on behalf of others!!

2. *Affirm those who feel "weaker"*

We should be ready to give special care to "*weaker*" brothers & sisters, those who might feel readily dispensable, or at least who do not feel they count.

I would like to think that in a church such as ours everybody has a place.

But what about single people? What about couples without children? Does our monthly family service have the effect of marginalizing those who are not in families?

We like to think of ourselves as a multi-cultural church: but the reality is that we are a white majority church, and it is not always easy being a minority in such a church.

Paul here in 1 Cor 12 seems to suggest that there is a place for positive discrimination in the church.

3. *Sympathize with those in trouble*

If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer together with it;

It has been said that "*Nothing in human experience touches us more acutely with a sense of compassion (i.e. suffering-with) than the sight of a neighbour or friend in deep distress*". This compassion - this suffering with - is the true meaning of sympathy. sympathy is a feeling with and for the other.

Certainly, when one part of my body suffers, then all the rest of me suffers too.

If someone steps on my toe, it's not just my toe that hurts, but the whole of me hurts.

If I am trying to put up a hook and hit my finger by accident, I am just as likely to say that "*I hurt myself*" as "*I hurt my finger*".

What is true of the human body, should be true of the church, the body of Christ.

The body of Christ has a common nerve, whereby if one suffers, then all do too.

Peterson, *The Message* paraphrases : "***If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt, and in the healing***". A reminder that sharing in the hurt, is often part of the process of healing. "*If pain causes us to go inward, there is no more communication with the world outside; if it causes us to go outward in retaliation, then we lose the message we bear... If pain causes us to go forward, then we are not bearing the pain, we are using the pain*" (Dr Samuel Kamelson)

4. Share in the joy of others

"If one part is praised, all the other parts share in its happiness"

Peterson: "***If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance***"

Strange as it may seem, sharing in somebody else's joy is not always easy - particularly if they are blessed in a way in which we have not been blessed. All too often we become jealous, envious, even resentful of the blessing of others.

"It requires the grace of true humility to be genuinely glad when another is being blessed, used and praised" (David Prior)

Perhaps the key to sharing in the joy of others is a deeper understanding of the body metaphor. In so far as they too are members of the body, their joy is our joy. Expressing it in terms of the human body, when my back is being massaged, I actually feel good all over - or when I have had a good meal, it is not just my stomach which feels comfortable, but all of me!

Finally, please note that Paul speaks of "**all the parts of the body**" caring for one another.

I.e. pastoral care can't just be delegated to the seven members of the pastoral team or to the leaders of the 31 care groups. All of us are to be involved.

True, in a church of our size we cannot all be there for one another.

However, there is one practical way in which we can express our care for one another: viz. by belonging to small group, and by caring for the dozen or so members which belong to our group.

"You are the body of Christ, and each one is a part of it" (v27)

Let me challenge each one of you this morning to work out your duty of care, so that we live up to our calling of being a community of supportive members.