

## **One Body, Many Parts and a Principle of Double Exclusion (or, Two Things You Cannot Say) – 1 Corinthians 12**

Two practical realities fed the need for the early church to live out its faith in a context of genuine reconciliation. First, there simply was no other “church” to go to. When the original Apostles and Paul went with their missionary teams, preached the Gospel and started new churches, everyone was invited to the same group. There was no competition of denominational claims or special interest Christianity to appeal to the peculiar desires of unbelievers or new Christians. There was only one church. Second, the major cities of the Roman Empire were multi-ethnically and socio-economically diversified by the strong, iron fisted rule of Rome. Like all Empires before and after them, the Romans conquered people and relocated them at will, often to existing Roman cities as slaves and artisans. Corinth was one such example. First, it was completely destroyed by the Roman army in 146 B.C. and then rebuilt by Rome in 44 B.C. The city was re-populated with a mixture of Italians, Greeks, Asians and Jews.<sup>1</sup> As these diverse and often hostile people groups responded to the good news of the Gospel and gathered together as the church at Corinth, they were immediately drawn into the need and the call for reconciliation.

The narrative of 1 Corinthians tells us, among many other things, the struggle of this church to move towards unity. The divisions referred to throughout the book are so numerous it is obvious even to the casual reader that only the power of God through the Cross of Christ could effectively produce reconciliation. There were social divisions between rich and poor (1:26-31, 11:7-22); theological divisions (15:12); divisions over who was the best Apostle/Teacher to follow (1:10-17); divisions over spiritual maturity (8:1ff); and divisions over spiritual gifts (14:1ff). And yet, despite the list of sins and failures, Paul relentlessly presses the case for unity because of his confidence, not in the Corinthians themselves, but in God, who “will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful” (1 Cor 1:8, 9).

Although Paul’s biblical reasoning with the Corinthian church for unity is spread throughout the entire book, for our purposes we want to focus on a key statement in chapter 12:

<sup>12</sup> “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. <sup>13</sup> For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body-- whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free-- and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. <sup>14</sup> Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. <sup>15</sup> If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. <sup>16</sup> And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. <sup>17</sup> If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? <sup>18</sup> But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. <sup>19</sup> If they were all one part, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup> As it is, there are many parts, but one body. <sup>21</sup> The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” <sup>22</sup> On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are

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<sup>1</sup> “Corinth” The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible Abingdon Press (1962), p. 682

indispensable,<sup>23</sup> and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty,<sup>24</sup> while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it,<sup>25</sup> so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.<sup>26</sup> If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.<sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” 1 Cor 12:12-27

Paul’s argument here is simple, but has profound implications for the life of the local and global church. He describes the foundational unity and diversity of the church, and then makes two very exclusive statements. First, the unity and diversity of the church is summed up in one short phrase- “one body, many parts.” The analogy is drawn from the human body. The implications are meant to be as obvious as the nose on our face. To be a whole body, to be able to give full expression to what the body of Christ can be and do, we need all the parts, and those parts are defined in ethnic and socio-economic terms. The spiritual gifting of the body is given not just to different individuals, but also to different ethnic and socio-economic groups; to “Jews and Greeks, slave and free” (12:13). Paul’s phrase, “Jews and Greeks” seems to be a synonym for “Jews and Gentiles” in the Corinthian (Greece) context. The full maturity of the body of Christ, the full expression for which it was created by God, can only be achieved as the gifting of each diverse element of the church is brought together and learns to function in the same way the intricate inter-relationship of the parts of the human body function. The Jews and all the other multitude of nations and ethnic groups, as well as believers from the great diversity of social backgrounds that range from slave to free, are all equally needed members of the body.

In practical terms, that means a group of rich Christians meeting without the presence and gifting of the poor as an intricate part of the church will, of necessity, be handicapped. And vice versa. The poor without the rich will be limited in their expression as the church. It also means a group of only Anglo, or only African-American or only Asian, or only Kaamba (Kenya) or only Tutsi (Rwanda) or only Chin (Myanmar) or only homogenous-of any kind- of believers, will be thwarted in their ability to fully manifest the wisdom and kingdom of God as the church.

Of course there are many objections that can be raised to this analysis. One common, seemingly obvious objection is, “How could this possibly apply to a group of believers who live in a homogeneous community?” A seemingly honest question, to which only one reply is needed: kindly point out such a community. Show one part of the world or even one community where there is not some level of either social and/or ethnic (tribal or clan) diversity of some kind, in some form or fashion present either within the community or within walking distance or a short drive. Even the most intentionally segregated wealthy communities are only minutes away from the poor, and most certainly have within their geographical area, widows or fatherless children. Wealthy communities can only exist with a sub-stratum of low-income workers present in some form, who help provide the manual labor and traditional craftsman needs for the community. In the most homogeneous of wealthy U.S. suburban communities, Mexican and other immigrant workers repair roofs, landscape lawns, cook in restaurants and provide a host of other services. And lower income neighborhoods and entire cities with large concentrations of the poor are only a quick trip down the road. Even in rural areas throughout the villages of the world, clan and family and tribal differences exist in close proximity to one another. Except for

extreme cases where a small people group intentionally seek isolation -and suffer the consequences- the reality is that the world, overall, is populated in regions of varying degrees of diversity.

Since the people of God actually live in real, diverse communities, the movement of the church towards multiple forms of segregation has to have an element of intentionality about it, even if it is not always malicious. Those who are different, ethnically or socio-economically are excluded by an active refusal to care enough about them to include them. While this segregation does not mean God is thwarted in his freedom to bless and use the church despite her constant tendency to move towards homogeneous conformity, Paul does lay down two rules for the church in all generations that is a normative principle that cannot be ignored; they are rules that excludes homogeneous or segregationist thinking: we cannot say to one another, 'I don't belong;' nor can we say 'I don't need you.'

Paul spends a significant portion of 1 Corinthians 12 stating the obvious about how interconnected the body is, when it might seem to us he could summarize this truth in one or two phrases. In comparison, many of Paul's statements and teachings in his letters are so dense, so compact, that preachers and theologians will spend hours and pages unpacking the significance of one sentence. But here, Paul goes out of his way to make sure we do not too quickly read past the practical implications of being one body with many parts. He speaks at length because we need to pay attention to something we are naturally prone to explain away in self-deceptive, sinful, sophisticated and dismissive terms.

The first statement or mind-set that Paul absolutely forbids relates to the persons who might feel like their gifting, in the context of their social, economic or ethnic position, excludes them from being a valuable part of the body. "If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be?" (12:15, 16). In these words Paul communicates something to the Corinthian believers that should be, in turn, communicated in every church, in every community of believers in the world. Every believer, and every ethnic and socio-economic group of believers, regardless of their position in life, are a vital, gifted part of the body of Christ. The clear application is for those who would see themselves, or be seen by others, as "lesser" members of the body. Paul's point is simply that their gifts are actually indispensable to the full expression of the church in its call to disciple the nations and live out the kingdom of God. These believers need to know that God wants them to own this truth for themselves: "I cannot say, 'I don't belong.'"

The kind of thinking that says, "I don't belong" allows for self-pity, a diminished view of ourselves that is beneath the dignity God has given us, and allows us to think we can isolate ourselves from certain parts of the body of Christ. Christians who are either poor or lack formal education or who may have suffered from severely broken families can look with disdain at themselves, and despise the fact that God has Sovereignly chosen them from that very place in history, with the very sorts of life experiences they have encountered, because he wants to use all of that in glorious way to reveal his salvation to others and build the body of Christ. In fact, God delights in using the things and people the world considers lowly, weak, foolish and of "no account" to confound the pride and arrogance of man (1 Cor 1:26-31). Of course, too easily, the

despising of ourselves can turn to envy and a despising of others. To counteract this kind of thinking that feeds into segregation and division within the body of Christ, Paul lays down this firm command and principle- “don’t say”- within your heart and your mind or by your actions- “I don’t belong.”

Paul was not making up an abstract principle that might come in handy some day. These were issues that were cutting away at the call and commitment to reconciliation in the early church, and continue to be a source of division to this day. Paul began addressing a series of divisive issues in 1 Corinthians 11:17, “In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good.” One of the harmful aspects of their meetings was the mistreatment of the poor at their fellowship meals. They had a custom of sharing a meal together at their church meetings where, very likely, the rich provided the food and drink for everyone else. Somewhere over the course of time these meals degenerated to the point where the poor were neglected. The rich ate their fill of the food they brought and even went so far as to get drunk, while the believers who had nothing were left to go hungry, feeling humiliated and despised (1 Cor 11:21, 22). This attitude of superiority and divisiveness (1 Cor 1:26-31) was brought over into an assessment of the value of spiritual gifts. Contextually, it is not difficult to assume the same rich or powerful or socially dominant members of the Corinthian church who ate and drank their fill at the meals, also looked down on the “slaves” and others from lower social classes as unimportant members of the body. Those who were considered “weaker” and “less honorable” (12:22-23) were treated as insignificant parts of the body and made to feel they had no valuable gifting for the body. (In the excessively segregated church in the West, the exclusion has gone even further. The rich and poor not only do not eat together; too often they do not worship, fellowship or minister together in any form.) Paul’s remedy is to strengthen the heart of the “weaker” believer by reminding them and everyone else that God has Sovereignly distributed the gifts and Sovereignly placed the various members of the body exactly where he wanted them to be, and that without each part, there would be no whole body (12:18,19).

Paul then goes on to rebuke the socially dominant members of the church by forbidding a second mindset. He tells them, “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’” (12:21). His choice of body parts is not irrelevant. We naturally think of our eyes and head as more important than our little toe, unless we stub it on something hard. But soon enough, we can forget about it again. Those who saw themselves as socially, and consequently in terms of gifting, more important, would have a natural, sinful tendency to ignore the “lesser” parts of the body. Paul tells them in no uncertain terms, “You cannot say, ‘I don’t need you.’”

But why does he say this? And is it true? In what very practical ways does the church need rich and poor, slave and free, Jew and Asian and African and Anglo all working closely together? Haven’t we proven we can have “church” without a real, practical commitment to reconciliation? If you ask a group of middle class, socially dominant Christians in the West to explain precisely why and how they need the poor, there is most often an awkward silence. There is an obvious answer that is not spoken in a straightforward fashion but is nonetheless the operating mode of much of the church: “Yes, we can have segregated churches and still be the church. We don’t need rich and poor or those from different ethnic backgrounds to be ‘in church’ together in order to have a genuine expression of real Christians functioning as a real, healthy

church.” And this is, to a limited degree of course, true. This reality occurs, quite literally, the vast majority of the time every Sunday morning in the United States. But what the local church cannot be, in this condition of segregation, is the full manifestation of the body of Christ that God intends. Paul says, in absolute terms, one ethnic or social group simply does not possess all the gifts that are needed to be the full expression of the body. A segregated church, racially, tribally and/or socio-economically segregated anywhere in the world, will be handicapped because it will be missing vital parts of the body. The only way to accept that handicapped condition as “normal” is to re-define what normal, whole or healthy means. This, in turn, can only come from redefining or limiting the nature of the kingdom and the purposes of Christ for us as his people.

The answer to the real, practical need for reconciliation is rooted in the purpose of the kingdom of God and the call of the great commission. The kingdom of God is meant to be the manifestation of God’s rule on earth, by the Spirit, in and through his people (Mt 6:9ff), gathered from all the nations (1 Pet 2:4ff). It is a kingdom that is to be marked by justice, compassion and humility (Micah 6:8) where the poor, the vulnerable and the disenfranchised are given special attention by the people of God (Isa 11:1ff; Jer 22:15,16; Amos 5:15,24; Luke 4:18ff; Acts 4:32ff; James 1:27). The Great Commission is a call to disciple all the nations, baptizing and teaching everything Christ has commanded us (Mt 28:18-20). The very nature of these commands requires reconciliation and an “all hands on deck” involvement. We need the gifts of everyone to manifest and teach the kingdom of God.

The idea of an all Anglo or all African-American or all Kaamba (Kenyan), or all Chin (Burmese), or all rich, or all “youth oriented,” or all “art-driven” church accomplishing these kingdom and great commission mandates in a segregated fashion is, on the very surface of things, simply not possible. It does not even make practical sense to think that a group of wealthy Christians meeting in an all wealthy church, isolated from poor believers, would have the wisdom and knowledge needed to demonstrate justice and compassion to the poor of their broader community or to the poor of the earth. In fact, much of evangelical western missions in the past several decades has gotten into trouble precisely because we have been increasingly sending middle class missionaries who have had little to no experience in dealing with the poor or cross cultural reconciliation issues in their own culture and church life, into communities where poverty and tribal differences are the norm, and they are ill-equipped to know how to effectively apply the Gospel. While this is a bit of a generalization, the most significant missionary movement of the last 40 years has been from the Assembly of God believers, who were more often less formally trained and from lower economic backgrounds than the other rising, middle class evangelical denominations.

The only way to exist as a segregated church, and still try in some fashion to be faithful to God’s call to pursue his kingdom, requires us to deny the need for reconciliation and in some way, deny the nature of the kingdom of God as a call for compassion for the poor and needy as one of the central, defining, Covenantal, kingdom obligations of the church. If we do not dare deny that, the segregated church will try to find a way to only minimally engage in these kingdom issues, most often through the financial support of others who are “called” to such ministry. Any of these options, by definition, will result in a handicapped expression of the

church and the kingdom. Instead, God has formed the parts of the body in such a way that they are truly “indispensable” to one another (1 Cor 12:22) to fulfill God’s kingdom purposes.

So what makes the need to be reconciled so necessary? The answer is simply this: in order to fulfill this multi-faceted mandate of the King, to see all nations reconciled under Christ and all nations learning how to implement the justice, mercy and humility of the kingdom of God, the poor need the rich who have gifting, talent, compassion and resources to bring to the table, and the rich need the poor who likewise, Sovereignly, have gifting, talent, compassion and resources to bring to table. The different ethnic groups need one another for the same reason. When Paul planted churches, they included slaves and masters (Onesimus- Philemon), merchants (Lydia- Acts 16) soldiers (the Philippian Jailer- Acts 16) and politicians (Sergius Paulus- Acts 13).

Having said that we all need each other, and at the risk of being misunderstood, it still needs to be stated at this point that the poor and oppressed of the earth have a position of greater attention and focus in the kingdom. The kingdom, as Jesus proclaimed it, is “for the poor” (Luke 6:20-26); he was anointed by the Spirit to “preach good news to the poor” (Isa 61:1, Luke 4:18-21). And of course, this makes perfectly good sense. The vast majority of the world is poor. This does not mean the rich cannot be saved, nor does it mean the rich are not absolutely needed. It just means what it clearly says: the focus of kingdom activity is towards the poor and disenfranchised. God is especially attentive to the cry of the oppressed and the fatherless (Psalm 72:11-14). Would we really want a God who was indifferent to the abandoned orphans of Africa or Asia, or cared very little for the oppressed women of Afghanistan or the fatherless children of inner-city communities (or the suburbs for that matter) in the States? God is determined to make sure his people give special attention to the most needy, and so he gives the poor gifting that makes them indispensable to the fulfillment of his kingdom purposes. In a foundational sense, the poor often understand the issues of the kingdom in a way the rich do not, because they understand the needs for justice and compassion from a practical, experiential level (which also, often, comes wrapped in and related to ethnic oppression).

In addition, the believing poor are also, generally, people of greater practical faith. God has made sure the “lesser” members of the body have greater honor. At least, that is the picture the Scriptures paint. James speaks bluntly when he says, “Listen my dear brothers; has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have insulted the poor” (James 2:5,6). What was the insult? Saying to the poor, “Sit on the floor by my feet,” while saying to the rich, “Here’s a good seat for you” (James 2:3,4). Such actions demonstrate a lack of understanding how much the poor and oppressed must daily exercise their faith and trust God through a constant barrage of trials and difficulties. In many ways, in the West, the insult is on a far greater scale, through communicating a “not welcome here” message to the poor by building church structures and conducting worship services that are really meant to appease middle class sensibilities and have the effect of making the poor feel out of place. These things may not be done maliciously, but they are done without an urgent sensitivity to and high regard for the poor. Reconciliation with the poor is not seen as something of significant practical value because among other things, the purposes of the kingdom in manifesting justice for the poor of the earth are not clearly embraced.

Finally, the pattern of biblical history, and I would argue therefore, the intended pattern for us today, is for God to purposefully lead his people to associate with the poor, both in their calling and in the type of discipline and training he brings into our lives. God is, in the highest sense, the kind of God who looks after the oppressed of the earth (Ps 72:1-4, 12-14) and he is committed to teaching his people to have the same character. The Old Testament people of God were intentionally led into a long period (400 years) of oppression, in part, to be prepared to be a people of genuine compassion, justice and humility (Gen 15:13,14 cf. Ex 22:21, 23:9). Their leaders were constantly subjected, by God's permissive and willing hand, to learning lessons through the practical experience of oppression (Abraham and Pharaoh, Gen 12; Joseph in Egypt; David and Saul) and poverty of resources (Moses in the desert wanderings, Deut 8:2ff; Joshua at Jericho; Gideon with his 300 vs. 110,00; David vs. Goliath). Why? So they might be people of faith, humility and compassion. This pattern is repeated in the ministries of Christ (Luke 2:1-7, Mt 4:1ff, 8:20, Phil 2:6,7), the Apostles (Acts 3:6ff, 1 Cor 4:9ff), and the early church (Acts 4:32ff). Since the close of the New Testament, most of the ministry of most of the church in most countries has been conducted in very humble, poor circumstances. This is not because God is indifferent to the needs of his people and carelessly leaves them in poverty. It is because he has an agenda for us that is defined by being part of his kingdom of justice and righteousness on behalf of the poor of the earth, and the church has a need to know on an experiential level what it means to walk in faith, humility and love in those humble circumstances.

The intent here is not to glamorize "the poor" in a broad sense that would suggest being poor in and of itself has spiritual merit. The poor are just as capable of having materialistic, ungrateful, blindly racist, self-serving hearts as the unbelieving rich. The poor we are talking about, as members of the body of Christ, the poor who are "blessed" (Luke 6:20), are also those who are "poor in spirit" (Mt 5:3) and look to God for their deliverance (Psalm 14:6, 22:6, 34:6). But, we must still be very clear about this: God did not come to save the "worthy poor" any more than he came to save the "worthy rich." He came to save messy sinners from both groups and equip all of us to pursue his kingdom of compassion, love and justice.

But it is not just that the poor or formally uneducated only bring valuable perspectives on issues of justice and compassion, they also bring valuable teaching gifts and theological insight. Remember that the original Apostles were after all, by and large, poor and formally uneducated. Their gifting for leadership was not in any way related to their social status. It was a remarkable thing for highly educated Pharisees, government workers and wealthy business people to come and sit at the feet of fishermen and learn about the kingdom of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. This kind of thing can only happen in the upside down kingdom of God.

When it comes to fulfilling the great commission call to teach all the nations of the world the full richness of what Christ has revealed in his Word, how could Anglos, or any other single ethnic group, possibly think they have the experiential and cultural breadth of knowledge and understanding to accomplish this task as a mono-cultural group? This is not meant to undermine the universal authority of the Word of God, or to say God cannot speak in a universal way through specific individuals speaking the timeless truths of God's word. He clearly does that. But it is recognizing that apart from the foundational work done by the Apostles, no one ethnic group is invested with all the gifting needed to teach the rest of the worldwide body of Christ the

full understanding and implementation of the kingdom. This was already evident in the book of Acts where the church at Antioch had prophets and teachers who were Jewish (Barnabus and Saul), and possibly black and Greek North African (Simeon, called Niger and Lucius), as well as a member of the political elite (Manaen), Acts 13:1. As Paul established churches throughout the Roman Empire it is clear he was not focused on only appointing ethnic Jews to positions of leadership; two of his more prominent pastors and co-workers were Timothy, half Greek and half Hebrew (Acts 16:1), and Titus, a Greek (Gal 2:3). As we know from the early history of the post-Apostolic church, some of the most prominent teachers were from a variety of national and ethnic backgrounds: Clement and Origen, were Egyptians; Tertullian, was the son of a Roman Centurion; Cyprian, was from present day Tunisia (North Africa); Jerome, was from the present day Balkan Peninsula (Southeastern Europe); and Augustine of Hippo, was from present day Algeria (North Africa).

Yet, in too many local churches and entire denominations, we only have one preaching voice from one ethnic group trying to understand and communicate the whole message of God that is intended to have a multi-ethnic, reconciliation based focus and application (Mt 28:18-20). Ethnically segregated groups of believers have become comfortable with hearing from their own. The old divisions of the church at Corinth where one says, "I follow Paul" and another, "I follow Apollos," have been allowed to play out in grand scale where we no longer have to openly wrestle with such issues of reconciliation because we have "baptized" and legitimized segregation to such an extent that we think it is healthy and natural for believers to coalesce around one, culturally dominant teacher. But the Word of God remains unchanged: "You cannot say, 'I don't need you'" to the different ethnic and social groups that make up the body of Christ.

These three passages of Scripture - the High Priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17, the message of God's eternal purpose of reconciliation in Eph 1, and the Sovereignly designed, inter-dependent relationship of the ethnic and socio-economic members of the church described in 1 Corinthians 12- all point to a need for reconciliation on a far broader scale than the church is currently practicing. But these are not the only Scriptures that address this issue. We need to look at the broad, Covenantal obligation to reconciliation revealed in the Old Testament