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Interdependence, Not Independence

12: 20-31a

Interdependence, not independence DIG: How does the human body demonstrate diversity? How does Paul counter the tendency toward spiritual pride? How does the variety of gifts in a Messianic congregation or church give greater value to the giftedness of the individual? Why are apostles, prophets, and teachers ranked and the others not? From his rhetorical questions in verses 29-30, what do you see as another problem in this church?

REFLECT: How can you keep diversity from becoming disunity? Of the spiritual gifts listed here, do any have your name on it? How so? How can you support others' spiritual gifts where you worship? How does your place of worship view the working of spiritual gifts? Take time to reflect on how God has used you to make a difference in His Church. Thank Him for the opportunities and ask Him to help you be more sensitive to being used by Him in the future.

We need others in our lives.



In this chapter **Paul** deals with two primary reasons some believers never become involved in ministry. Some feel they have no **gifts** or abilities that are worthwhile, and so they sit back and let others do the work (**12:15-17**). Now **Paul** looks at the other side of the coin. **He** turns from the humbler members, to those who possessed great **gifts**, who evidently thought they could manage well enough without the “unimportant” contributions of lowly people.³⁸⁴ **Paul’s** delightful and playful use of **the body** metaphor continues with more personification to state, one more time, that each **part of the body** is needed, though this time the stress is a little different. Before **he** emphasized that no **body part** should become so depressed as to feel it is unneeded by the rest of **the body**. But here, **he** emphasizes that no **body part** should become so proud and arrogant as to say, “I don’t need you,” to the other **body parts**. **But as it is, there are indeed many parts, yet just one body. So, the eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you”; or the head to the feet, “I don’t need you” (12:20-21).**³⁸⁵

With this statement, **Paul** seems to be getting closer to the difficult issue being faced in **Corinth**. As we have seen on several occasions in this letter, pride was indeed a problem among **them (1:29, 3:3-4, 4:18-19, 5:1 and 6, 11:18-22)**. **The eye** and **the head** are transparent metaphors for those in leadership roles, who are likely to be more affluent and better educated. **The hands** and **the feet** represent the laboring class or slaves. **The eyes** and **the heads** in **Corinth** were getting special treatment and then began to think that **they** were special. This bred a sense of pride and self-sufficiency, since those who think **they** are all-important can imagine that the “minor players” are superfluous and dispensable.³⁸⁶ However, **they** overestimated **their** own importance and underestimated that of the other believers. Disobeying the principles of **Matthew 18:10** and **Romans 14:1 to 15:7**, **they** disdain those **they** saw as **weak** and less significant (**to see link click [Bm - The Weaker Brother or Sister](#)**).

On the contrary, Paul continues, **the parts of the body that seem to be less important turn out to be all the more necessary (12:22)**. As important as some of the prominent **parts of the human body** are, it *is* possible to live without **them**. **They** are important, but not absolutely **necessary**. You can lose **an eye** or an ear, **a hand** or a leg, and still live. Our internal organs are hidden, but more vital. You might notice the breathing of your lungs or the pulse of your heartbeat, but their work is not nearly as obvious as what we do with our **hands** or **feet**. **Those** less noticed **parts** (internal organs) **seem to be less important** than the rest of **the body** (external limbs), but **they** are actually **more necessary**. As a

result, **they** are protected by our skeleton and the rest of **the body**. **They** are indispensable. **The body** cannot live without **them**. You can live without legs, but not without lungs.

The most vital ministries always include some with **gifts** that are not obvious. The faithful prayers and services of a few dedicated believers who hold no office frequently are the most reliable and productive channels of spiritual power in a congregation. The **Corinthian** church had failed to be considerate and appreciative of those who did not have the “out front” **gifts**, such as prophecy, healings, or languages. Those with less noticeable ministries are sometimes vulnerable to misunderstanding, and often to neglect and lack of appreciation. They should be protected by fellow believers, just as **the body** protects its vital organs.

Continuing the analogy, **Paul** reminds us that **upon body parts which we consider less dignified** (Greek: *aschemona*) **we bestow greater dignity. And the parts that are less presentable are the ones we make as attractive as we can (12:23). Unseemly** probably refers to **the parts** of our **body** that are not especially **attractive**. It seems to be referring to the torso in general. It might be flabby thighs or a paunch, but is usually covered and considered less attractive. The use of the word **bestow** (Greek: *peritithemi*, meaning *to put around*) suggests the idea of clothing around a **body** in general. We spend more time and money clothing those **parts** of our **body** than the ones that are more obvious (such as the face and **hands**), and by doing so, **we bestow greater dignity . The less presentable parts** (Greek: *aschemona*, meaning *shameful, unseemly, or unpresentable*) refer to those private **parts** of **the body** that are needed for reproduction, but need to be treated with modesty. The face, in the meantime, we leave uncovered. The idea is, that, in like manner, we should not despise or disregard those members of the church who are “seemingly” of lower rank who are “covered up,” or not noticed. It is not those **body parts** themselves, but the display of them, that is unseemly or shameful. **They** are not, like **the hands**, face, and **head**, exposed to public view.

It is from a warped sense of values that a believer, well known because of a prominent gift, looks down on other believers who possess no obvious gift, and seeks great honor on his or her own. That attitude is a direct contradiction of the principle of concern that characterizes **a body**. It is far more consistent with self-preservation that **the parts** of **a body** that have great outward beauty and more abilities, devote themselves to the well-being of those **parts** that are not so well equipped, but are essential to life. Sensible people are more concerned about their heart than their hair. Those in leadership positions and prominence not only should

not look down on those whose **gifts** are less noticeable, but should take special care to show them appreciation and to protect them when necessary. More gifted believers are especially obligated **to encourage the timid, to assist the weak, and to be patient with everyone (First Thessalonians 5:14).**³⁸⁷

While those who have the more noticeable and attractive **gifts have no need for such encouragement** and protection. **Greater dignity** and honor comes to **them** almost as a matter of course, and that honor **they** should share with members whose **gifts** are less attractive and more likely to be ignored. **Indeed, God has put the body together in such a way that he gives greater dignity to the parts that lack it.** It is clear from what **Paul** says here that heavenly reward will be based not only on what we do with our own **gifts** and ministries, but on our attitudes toward and support of **the gifts** and ministries of others. Mutual support is necessary to avoid both overconfidence and lack of confidence. It is also necessary **so that there will be no disagreements within the body, but rather all the parts will be equally concerned for all the others (12:24-25).**

Drawing **his** conclusion, **Paul** states that mutuality is at the heart of fellowship: building reciprocal relationships, sharing responsibilities and helping each other out. **Thus, if one part of the body suffers, all the parts suffer with it; and if one part is honored, all the parts share its happiness (12:26).** All have experienced, at one time or another, how the whole physical **body** suffers when one **part** hurts. What is natural in the human **body** should also be apparent in **the body of Messiah**. Suffering and rejoicing together (**13:5-6**) are a sign of unity in which each one truly seeks the advantage of the other.³⁸⁸

After drawing the conclusion, **Paul** makes the application. This is how **Paul** began the discussion about **the body: For just as the body is one but has many parts; and all the parts of the body, though many, constitute one body, and so it is with the Messiah (12:12).** and now **he** ends in a similar manner: **Now you together constitute the body of the Messiah, and individually you are parts of it (12:27).** These two verses frame the entire discussion of **the Church as the Body of Messiah. You** are in the emphatic position, put first for emphasis. In case **the Corinthians** have missed the point, **Paul** clarifies that **he** is talking about **them!**

Paul now reverts back to the subject of spiritual **gifts** in **the Church** and gives a different list of those whom **God** has appointed: **And God has placed in the Church first, apostles; second, prophets; third, teachers.** In this listing **the**

apostle does some ranking, the same as **he** does in **Ephesians 4:11**. Most important for **the Church** are **the apostles**, there are only **twelve (Mt 19:28; Rev 21:14)**, and **they** have served the unique function of establishing **the foundation of the Church** by telling the truth about **Yeshua** and preserving the writings we now have in the B'rit Chadashah. Next comes **the prophets**, who will receive more attention in **Chapter 14** (see **Dk - The Priority of Prophecy over Tongues**), Third, comes **teachers**, who take the message of **the apostles** and teach it to believers in the local congregation and so build them up in the faith. After these first three there is no longer any ranking, merely a listing. **Paul** includes some of **the gifts he** listed earlier in **12:8-10**, and added a few others. **Then those who work miracles; then those with gifts of healing; those with ability to help; those skilled in administration; and those who speak in various tongues (12:28)**.

As **Paul** concludes this section, **he** resorts, as **he** so often has done, to another series of rhetorical questions, all of which expect a negative answer. By using these questions, **the apostle** is expressing in a different form what **he** has already taught earlier (see **Cj - The Varieties of Spiritual Gifts**), namely, that there is a variety of **gifts**, and that each believer has received at least one, and that no person has all **the gifts**. But there is one added implication here: there is no single **gift** that everyone has received. **Not all are apostles, are they? Not all are prophets, are they? or teachers? or miracle-workers? Not all have gifts of healing, not all speak in tongues, not all interpret, do they (12:29-30)?** The fact that **the Ruach** inspired **Paul** to declare: **Not all speak in tongues** suggests that this is not the second work of grace needed for salvation. It is only one **gift** among many - and in the context of **the church at Corinth**, it was a **gift** fraught with problems from the onset.³⁸⁹

Eagerly seek the better gifts (12:31a). The way this verse is usually translated presents some serious interpretive problems. Since **Paul** stresses **the Spirit's** sovereignty in distributing **the gifts**, and **he** writes to rebuke **the Corinthians** for favoring the showy **gifts**, why would **he** command them to **eagerly seek the better gifts**? Wouldn't that just encourage them to continue competing for status? But in fact, the verse is not actually commanding that at all. The English translation is misleading as to **Paul's** meaning. The verb form used here can be either indicative (a statement of fact) or imperative (a command). A better translation using the indicative form would be: **However, you are eagerly seeking the better gifts**. In other words, **Paul** was actually saying, "However, you are jealously

coveting the showy **gifts**.” That is a rebuke, which makes better sense of **Paul’s** next words: **But now I will show you the best way of all (12:31b)**. **He** is not commanding **them** to seek certain **gifts**, but condemning **them** for seeking the showy **ones**. **They** coveted the admiration of others. **They** craved the applause of men. **They** wanted to seem “spiritual.”³⁹⁰