

Christian Physiology 101

In the name of him who came to proclaim liberty to the captives, dear friends in Christ: The human body is truly a marvel. It's an exquisite synthesis of form, function, grace, and beauty. It's fairly simple outward appearance betrays what we now know to be an intricate design so complicated, interdependent, and well conceived that we are only beginning to scratch the surface of understanding how it all works. From the immense sophistication of the DNA molecule which is its blueprint, to the vastly involved systems that provide circulation, digestion, respiration, movement, feeling and the rest of the senses, all the way up those seemingly miraculous functions that account for reproduction, ward off diseases, and help the body to heal, new discoveries are being made almost daily that astonish researchers and confirm the words of Scripture that declare "*we are fearfully and wonderfully made.*"

Such discoveries, amazing as they are, shouldn't really surprise us. In fact, the biblical account of man's creation seems to emphasize the special attention the Lord used when designing the human body. All other created things he called into existence with a word: "*Let there be ... and there was.*" But when he got to the capstone of his creation, he paused to linger. We're told how carefully and thoughtfully he shaped the first man from the soil, each feature exactly as he wanted it to be ... not that he had to, of course: he *could* have done the *exactly* the same job with a single word like he had for everything else; but this was a labor of love. And he wanted us to know it. He wanted us to understand how very much interested he is in every tiny detail that pertains to us. He wanted us to know that we are the singular objects of his devotion.

There's an old joke (obviously thought up by a woman) that says that when God finished creating the first man, he critically evaluated what he had done and said, "*This is very good ... but I'm sure I can do so much better!*" Now, that's clearly intended to be a dig at men; but speaking for myself and the rest of the gentlemen present, if we confined the statement to the area of aesthetics, we would agree completely. We'd much rather admire the beauty of the female form, for there the Lord really outdid himself. And I'm only half joking. That the Lord held his hand, not creating her right away; but pausing again as if to further consider what he was about to do, suggests that he wanted to communicate to us just how special to him was the bride he fashioned for the first man. The infinite mind of God doesn't need to take time to think about things—so when he does take the time, it's to tell us that he's doing something *very* important to him, and that he's doing it exactly the way he desires.

All of which brings me to today's Epistle lesson, and the body that God has fashioned to be the bride of his *Son* in this place. I'm speaking of this congregation, the church here, which is the bride of Christ. And because in the scriptural definition of marriage, the two become one; we can call it the very body of Christ—just as St. Paul does when he says: "*You are the body of Christ, and individually members of it.*"

It's a profound description of our essential unity in Jesus. Together, having received the same rebirth in Baptism and the same Spirit of God, we are one body in him even though we are many individual members with a wide array of attributes and abilities. And if the Lord went out of his way to emphasize just how important each

minute detail of the human body was to him by lingering on his masterpiece when he created our first parents, how much more can we be sure that with all the time he's taken to assemble *this* group of parts, that we are *exactly* the body he planned to be here in this time and place? I want you to think about that: as marvelous a creation as the human body is, even more painstakingly crafted by the Lord is the body of believers that gathers here.

That means, as St. Paul tells us, that each and every one of us is an *essential* part of the whole. Everything is as God intended it to be. Not one of us is useless, or redundant, or expendable. No one here is just going along for the ride. You know, it wasn't too long ago that the appendix and tonsils were thought to be vestigial organs that served no purpose. That's been proven wrong. So just because we can't see or don't understand what a part does, doesn't mean we can do without it. In God's great design we all have a part to play in the body of Christ.

And that also means that there is absolutely no room for jealousy or envy among us. Just as a human body has many different parts performing hundreds of vital functions all at once, so does the body of Christ. But unfortunately, just as we do with our bodies' functions, we tend to rank them on an imaginary scale, assigning various duties a "higher" or "lower" rating depending on how "appealing" they strike us. And when we find ourselves performing a job that we rank low on that scale, we tend to grumble against those who are doing something perceived as being higher on the scale. But even the most "unappealing" function is absolutely vital to the health of the body. To prove it, you might run this experiment: determine not to take any garbage out of your home for a month or two. You'll soon discover how noble a task removing the trash can be.

And to show us just how ridiculous rivalry within the body really is, St. Paul imagines a conversation between body parts. First it's the feet that complain. And you can imagine what they'd be saying. "Hey! What's the deal here? We're down here carrying all the weight, always cramped inside these dark, tight shoes. Why is it that we're the ones who are down here where the rubber meets the road, getting dirty and sweaty all the time, and never getting any of the credit? You only think about us when we hurt. It's not fair! The hands, oh yes, the hands, they get all the interesting jobs. They get to hold things, and meet people, and scratch itches. And they get pampered: they get rings to wear, they get the manicures and soothing lotions—we're lucky to get a little talcum powder down here once in a while."

Then the ears chime in: "Yeah, well, it's the eyes that get all of the glory. Have you ever heard someone say, 'My, what beautiful *ears* you have?' I doubt it. 'What big ears', yes. Then it's, 'Here comes ol' Wing-nut' or 'Heya, Dumbo' or 'Look, it's the future King of England'. The biggest humiliation is when we have to be hooks for someone's glasses. Then not only do we have to do our own job, we have to help out those pathetic weak eyes who *still* get all of the attention."

And yes, there's some humor there; but what's not so funny is that it probably doesn't take much imagination to translate these comments into something you've heard someone say, or said or thought yourself. And it's a problem because it can be the cause of division when some part says, "Because I can't be what some other part is, or because I don't do what it does, or because I feel that my individual talents are being underutilized, or that I've already done my share, I'm not really part of the body. I'm

taking my ball and going home.” Paul’s point is that such an attitude is entirely inappropriate, because a part cannot be independent. By definition and by God’s design, it’s always a part of the body.

Paul moves on then to attack this problem from its opposite side: and that is the tendency of those with the imagined “higher” functions to look down upon those with the less appealing duties. It should be clear that if there is no place for envy and jealousy, neither is there room for feelings of superiority or the denigration of others. The head cannot say to the rest of the body, “I don’t need you”. It’s simply not true. A disembodied head can accomplish nothing; and I’ve already mentioned the absolute importance of even those tasks that are regarded as least.

What Paul is stressing in these passages is our total interdependence on one another. He would have us focus on our unity and common goals rather than bicker about our differences and waste effort struggling against each other. His main point is that our unity in Christ already exists; it’s not something we have to create. God put us together the way he wanted us to be. He made you part of his Son when he gave you the gift of life in him—when by his Spirit he washed away your sin and put in your heart faith in Christ and the salvation he achieved for us. And now Paul is calling you back to that point, the point of entry, to turn away from thoughts of selfish independence to see yourself again as part of the body of Christ. And to think of all of your fellow Christians not as competitors, but as other components of the same body you are part of.

So instead of having feelings of jealousy, we rejoice with those whom God has given special abilities or responsibilities. And we respect and appreciate the vital service each part does, without getting irritated if while performing some “lower” task outward signs of this appreciation are small and few. In a similar way, we sympathize with and help each other in times of need. When you stub your toe or get something in your eye, your whole body responds. That’s how Paul sees the body of Christ responding to a member who is hurting.

I guess the big question most people have is, “What’s my part in the body?” True, there are some who deliberately avoid asking the question for fear that it might be answered. They really aren’t interested in helping the body, they’d rather take it easy; but as has been observed already, God did not install any useless parts. If you’re part of the body, you have a job; and if you’re not doing it, you’re letting everyone down. We all need to examine ourselves to see if we’re not guilty of this; and if so, to repent and get to work.

Others don’t ask what their part is because they already know the answer and they don’t like it. I’m reminded of friend of mine who serves a large church in a major metropolitan area. He told me he was constantly having families visit that were looking for a church with an active youth program for their children. They’d try this church for a while and then that one ... never satisfied with what they found – but apparently, they knew what they were looking for. He said, “Do you suppose that it ever occurred to them that maybe they were the ones who were supposed to *join* a church and *help build* a solid youth program?” It’s always easier to criticize ... but the truth is if you see something that needs to be done, there’s a good chance that God is showing it to you for a reason; namely, that you should be acting upon it.

Beyond that, there are a number of duties we all share in common as members of the body of Christ. We get of list of them in today's Gospel lesson where the overall mission of Christ and his church is spelled out as plainly as it can be. And these are functions that any one of us can perform: To preach the good news to the poor, bind up the broken hearted, proclaim freedom for the captives, release from darkness for the prisoners, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. We can do these things simply by sharing the story of salvation in Christ. There are more: to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who grieve ... to rebuild what has been destroyed, to work the Lord's fields, and help to shepherd his flock. The task of Christ in the world is immense and has many facets. So as the old hymn goes, "*Let none hear you idly saying, "there is nothing I can do", while the souls of men are dying and the Savior calls to you."*"

So repenting of our past mistakes and selfish feelings, and receiving again the forgiving Word of Jesus that makes us part of his holy body in this place, let's all resolve today to let Christ guide us by his Spirit, so that we can put to work the abilities he's given us to achieve for him the part he wants us to play in the service of each other. And so may we, each part gladly and thankfully doing what God desires, fulfill *this* Scripture to the glory of his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria