1 Corinthians 12:15–24

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

> *If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now are they many members, yet but one body. And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: and those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: that there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another.*

The Foot's Complaint — and What It Means

Notice that the illustration begins at the bottom. The foot is down at the base of the body, kept clothed and protected, less visible than the hand. The hand is up and forward — seen all the time, doing the conspicuous work. So there is an aspect of complaint in starting with the foot: I am not in that position, I do not have that function. And what does it mean for the foot to say, I am not of the body? It means: I will not do anything. I am not going to walk. I am not

functioning in this matter. That is, it is refusing to answer to the Head. In effect, such a member is saying it has no responsibility to the Head — because the body is under the direction of the Head, and to withdraw from function is to withdraw from that direction.

There is also something worth noticing in the opening phrase itself: *if the foot shall say*. It is not the foot's role to say anything. Saying is the Head's prerogative. The foot's role is to carry and to walk. There is already in that phrasing an overstepping of proper place — the member has forgotten that it was set for the use of the Head.

From Lowest to Highest — Complaints Across the Whole Spectrum

Verse 16 moves to the other end: the ear and the eye are high up on the head of the human body. Verse 15 addresses what goes out — the foot carries the body, the hand does the work. Verse 16 addresses what comes in — the ear and the eye take information in. But the ear cannot do the eye's work, nor the eye the ear's. Each has its distinct and proper function.

So from lowest to highest — foot to hand in verse 15, ear to eye in verse 16 — the range of possible complaints is traced across the whole body. There is no position, high or low, from which discontent with one's divinely appointed place cannot arise. Yet every such complaint is equally groundless.

Verse 17 introduces a third danger: if the whole body were an eye, all distinctiveness would be destroyed. The clergy tends to do precisely this — to take all functions into itself, suppress many gifts, and in effect make the whole body into one member. If everything were merged into one, there would be no body at all — only a destruction of the very diversity through which the Head works. Verse 19 reiterates this point: if they were all one member, where were the body?

God Set the Members — For Himself

Verse 18 states the answer to all of this: *now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.* Darby notes that the verb *set* is in the middle voice, giving the force: he set them for himself. The members did not have a choice in this. God placed each one where he pleased, for his own pleasure and purposes. We are here for the pleasure of God — just as the Lord Jesus was here for the pleasure of God, and it is recorded of Him that He pleased not himself.

Those engaged in Christian ministry — which ought in some measure to be all Christians — should carry the consciousness that this is for the pleasure of God. Not for pleasing oneself, not simply for making others comfortable, because sometimes faithful ministry will make some people a measure unhappy. But it is for the pleasure of God.

Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

The human body is not simple. The interrelated interdependencies of even a single organ are remarkable. Consider the pancreas: the cells responsible for insulin production were found to regulate also a C-peptide bearing on nerve health, and to have a role in cholesterol regulation. One discovers more functions the further one looks. David's prophetic words were exact: *I am fearfully and wonderfully made* — written at a time when science knew almost nothing about the intricacy of the body's design.

The theory of evolution once listed scores of supposed vestigial organs in the human body — unnecessary remnants of a prior evolutionary stage. As understanding has grown, that list has been reduced to nothing. Not one member of the body has been shown to be without function. Indeed, some leading advocates of the theory concluded that man must have reached the end of the

evolutionary line because he has neither vestigial nor nascent organs. However reluctantly the admission came, it confirms precisely what this passage asserts: there is no unnecessary member. If God has set every member as it pleased Him, any suggestion that one is unnecessary is a reflection on God — it speaks against His wisdom and His work.

The members are not interchangeable either. If a foot is lost, one cannot take a hand and graft it in its place and expect it to serve as a foot. Remarkable surgical things are done today, but even the most skilled operation leaves the substitute member functioning as what it is, not as what it replaces — and the member taken from its place is wounded by the removal. Each member is constituted for its own function.

The Independent Will in the Member

Verse 21 takes the other direction: *the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee.* This is the greater disdaining the lesser — the more prominent member dismissing the less prominent. The eye may certainly mouth such words. But according to the constitution of the body as God has set it, the statement is simply untrue. You cannot actually enforce that independency in the body. It is a moral impossibility, however one may attempt it in practice.

The clergy tends to do precisely this. In the congregation of a clergyman, there may be members whose gift is suppressed by the system. In effect the system says to them: your gift is not needed. If you think you have a gift, go to school, obtain a licence from men, and then perhaps you may exercise it publicly. But if God has given the gift, the authorisation is already there. What pretence is it for man to suppose he can add to that? The man's system may suppress it by force — but that is entirely the man's responsibility. Here in the passage, such a spirit is clearly and wholly condemned.

Those Members Which Seem to Be More Feeble

Verse 22 introduces a qualification that guards against mere human estimation: *those members of the body which seem to be more feeble are necessary.* Not are feeble — but seem to be. Human estimation gets involved in these things, and it does not estimate according to the wisdom we ought to have from God. We judge by what is visible and prominent. There is not a member of the body that is not necessary. To derogate any one of them, no matter which, is a reflection on God. It speaks against His pleasure and what He has done.

Similarly, verse 23: *those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable.* We think — another acknowledgement that human judgement is at work here, and that it may be mistaken. The members that are invisible and unnoticed in ordinary life — those of whose function we are not even conscious — may be precisely the ones whose absence would be catastrophic. Lose a hand, and one continues on. Lose certain internal organs, and the body fails. God has given more abundant honour to the part that lacked in public prominence, because the body cannot do without it.

Tempering the Body Together

Verse 24 gives the summary: *God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked.* The whole is a divine design. God has not simply placed members at random — He has tempered, fitted, and adjusted the whole, so that every part contributes to every other, and the whole functions as one.

The object of this is stated immediately: *that there should be no schism in the body.* According to the divine design, there is no schism — no internal rent or fracture. But in terms of the responsibility of the members to carry this out in their actual conduct, the body is full of such fractures. The design does not change. The truth does not change. And the design calls upon the members to act

accordingly: *that the members should have the same care one for another*.

None of this is merely local, though those who hold to independency constantly press it in that direction. The passage is speaking of the church on earth — not of a local assembly. The independent spirit in the individual member that says, I have no need of thee, is in practical terms exactly what independency says of the assembly: we are complete in ourselves, we have no need of what is outside. However strongly that conclusion might be resisted when stated plainly, it is what the teaching actually means — and it stands condemned by this passage.

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