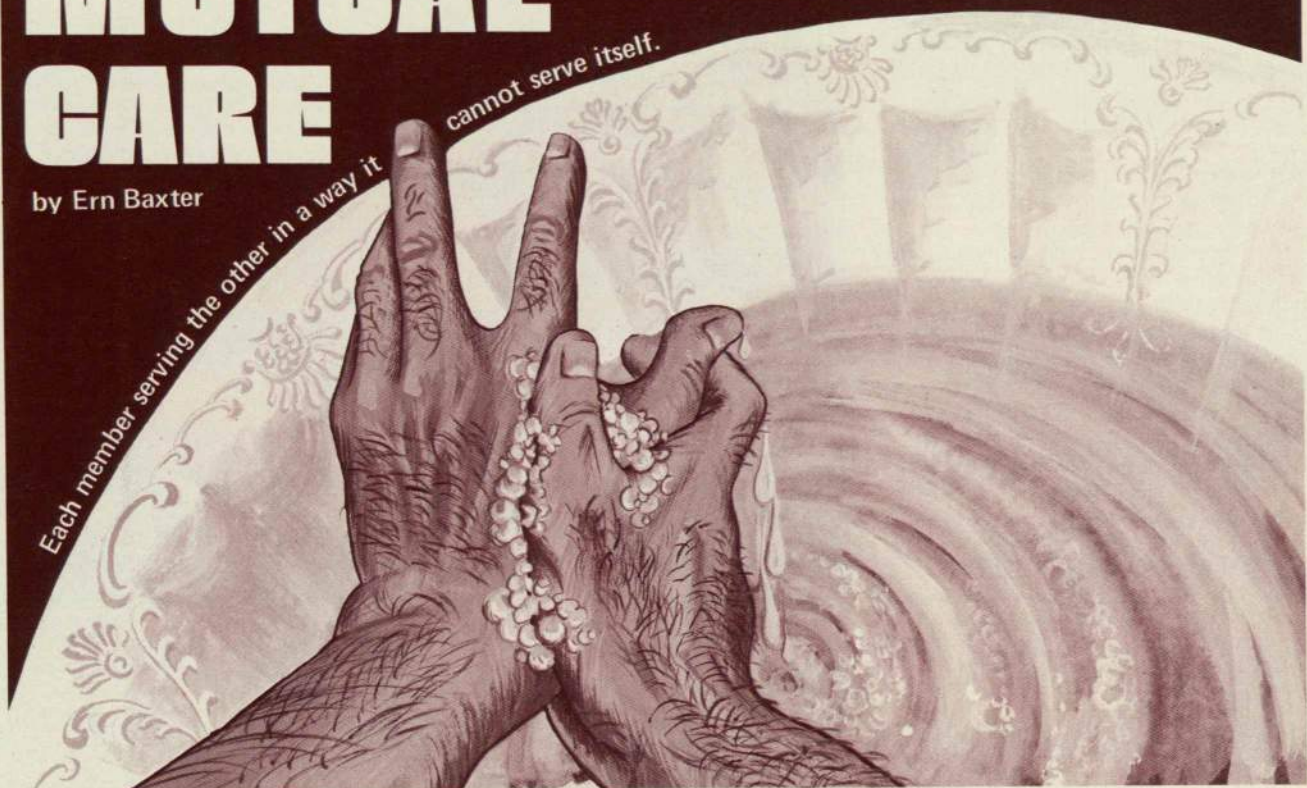


MUTUAL CARE

by Ern Baxter

Each member serving the other in a way it cannot serve itself.



Metaphors and analogies used in the Bible to describe the redeemed people of God depict a community characterized by unity with diversity and diversity in unity. Unity is not uniformity, and diversity is not division. The human body is one metaphor the Apostle Paul chooses to illustrate the divine purpose for the unity and diversity of Christ's Body. In the Corinthian letter he adopts that metaphor to point up the divisions and distortions that existed in the life of the church in that city.

In the first chapter, speaking directly about the serious divisions among the Corinthians, Paul entreats them that they should "all agree, and there be no divisions . . . but that they may be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgement" (verse 10). He next deals with the underlying causes for division, one of which is the important celebration of the Lord's Supper. He sternly states

that in the light of their division and disorder, "when you meet together it is not to eat *the Lord's Supper*," but rather *your own supper* (1 Cor. 11:20-21). The Lord's Supper is a meal of communion in which members of the redeemed community declare their organic solidarity as members one of another. They seal this unity by partaking of the blessed emblems of our Lord's body and blood. In Corinth, division nullified the meaning of the Holy Meal.

By using the body analogy, the apostle further explains what should constitute normal interpersonal relationships among the Corinthian Christians. There should be a unanimous involvement of all the members of the community, and this involvement should embrace a variety of spiritual gifts. However that variety must *not* produce division resulting from the diversity of the gift, since "to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit *for the common good*" (1 Cor. 12:7 NAS). While the gifts, ministries, and

results vary, they must not be allowed to cause division, drawing attention to the gift or gifted person, and creating cliques within the redeemed community. Diversity is intended to bring a divinely designed variety of ministry to the whole body to accomplish "the common good." If diversity does not contribute to unity then it is divisive, and self-destructive.

No one should claim credit for the gift which He exercises, nor consolidate a following around that particular gift as though it were something exclusively his. All divine enablements are sovereignly given, and that "one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually *just as He wills*" (1 Cor. 12:11 NAS). An understanding of the Spirit's sovereign giving should eliminate any tendency on the part of the gifted one to take credit for his gift, or to try to use it in any form of self-aggrandizement. Rather, the gift or enablement should be used in humble joy to bless the whole redeemed community. A beau-

tiful picture emerges when we envision a body of people all variously gifted by the Holy Spirit ministering to one another, manifesting maturity and Christian concord as a witness to the world. It is at this point that the apostle develops the analogy of the body, writing: "For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many are one body, so also is Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12 NAS). The human body is described in its unity as "one body" and yet in its diversity as having "many members." Then Paul makes a daring use of the name "Christ," as he says "so also is Christ." He is saying that this Body of redeemed men and women are, in their unity and diversity, the corporate manifestation of Christ in our time/space world.

The relationship between men and women who are in Christ is vastly different from the relationship between people who join an organization or share membership in some kind of a club. To be in Christ is to be not only organically related to God through Christ and the Holy Spirit, but to all others who are so related. This makes the community of men and women who are members of Christ also members one of another. Paul accentuates this in the following verse. "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13 NAS). Here we have both initiation and process. All have been baptized into this Body, and by continuing to drink of the Holy Spirit, healthy relationship is maintained between the various members of the body. Therefore, we have a supernatural initiation into an organic community, and a supernatural continuity in the Holy Spirit as it pervades that community as the one Source of the community's life.

He next says, "For the body is not one member, but many" (1 Cor. 12:14 NAS). Obviously, if the body consisted of merely one member, it would not be a body at all, for the very nature of a body consists in the variety

and diversity of its members. However, if the members are not functioning in both variety and diversity neither is the body a body. No member can function on its own and be a body. Each member requires the other members to form a body. And yet no member must seek to alter the distinctiveness of its particular nature and operation, otherwise it will make the body less than a body. Therefore Paul insists that the redeemed community is one organic whole, consisting of diverse members. That diversity is essential to unity and the unity can be accomplished only by the proper function of the diversities. It is the functional difference of the various parts that make it a Body. Any attempt by a single member to be the whole Body automatically rules out the existence of a Body.

It would seem obvious that the only way in which a body can operate at its maximum ability is when every member is healthy and functioning in its proper relationship to every other part. It should be equally obvious that the only way the Body of Christ can function and fulfill its destiny, is when every member of that Body is healthily exercising its distinctive role in relationship to every other part of the Body.

Paul then proceeds to personalize the various parts of the human body and give them speech. This of course is not possible in the human body, but it is very effective in showing how wrong it is for redeemed men and women to behave in a similar way in the Body of Christ. If the various parts of the human body had the ability to speak, and act independently they could throw the entire body into disorder which would result in malfunction if not death. The inference is very clear. Rebellion among its members would shortly destroy the human body. In the redeemed Body the various parts have what the members of the human body do not have, the power of moral choice. When choices are made in opposition to the normal functioning of the Body, the result is God-dishonoring malfunction.

The deploring problems Paul refers

to as he personalizes the various members of the Body in Corinth, are still seen among us today. They should draw the same kind of corrective attention from the present leaders of God's people as they did then. Let us look at those problems as Paul uses the analogy of the human body, personalizing its various members, giving them speech. We will all undoubtedly recognize familiar situations.

DOWNGRADING SELF

Paul's first point is that there should be no downgrading of one's self. "If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,' it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body,' it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?" (1 Cor. 12:15-17 NAS). As the parts of the body speak in these verses, we note that the less celebrated parts contrast themselves with the more celebrated.

The "foot" feels disqualified because it is not "the hand." Now, the hand is a very prominent part of the body. It can wield a skillful scalpel, or pen immortal poetry and prose. It may convey genius to a canvas, bringing joy to generations. It ministers the caress of care and concern, and reaches another in the firm handclasp of fellowship. It is understandable that the foot should feel less important than the hand. Paul has made his point well. In the diversity within the body some parts are obviously more prominent, and receive more recognition.

However, while the foot may not experience the same prominence nor be given the same recognition, it is no less a part of the body. Indeed, it is very necessary to the hand. Normally it is the foot which conveys the hand from place to place, enabling the hand to perform its distinctive duties. Paul is warning the members who fill what seems to be a less prominent place in Christ's Body, not to fall into the

danger of downgrading themselves.

At this point, we must recognize a difference between the foot in the human body and the "foot" in the Body of Christ, for here our analogy ceases. In actual fact, a foot in the human body cannot speak, and thus cannot downgrade itself. Rather, the natural foot is satisfied to fulfill its function without rebuttal and without questioning its worth to the body.

However, a "foot" in the Body of Christ does speak, does make decisions, and does hold opinions of its worth to the Body, and by downgrading himself, can render himself inoperative and useless. This involves a two-fold loss. First, by virtually repudiating his God-ordained place in the Body of Christ he seriously impairs his usefulness. At the same time, by his attitude of withdrawal and self-downgrading, he is robbing the Body of a very important member, without which it functions at only a fraction of its total capacity.

The ear also speaks and compares itself with the eye, lamenting that it does not enjoy the same prominence and recognition. How many poems have been written celebrating the ear; how many love songs have been written with the ear as theme? While the ear is useful, it is not one of the more celebrated parts of the body. On the other hand, the eye is celebrated in literature, and plays a large part in the language of romance. The well-known old song says, "drink to me only with thine eyes," not "with thine ears." So it would seem that the ear has a legitimate lament concerning the prominence and attention given to the eye. However the apostle again makes his point. Because the ear is not an eye is it not a part of the body? It is a very essential part of the body! But its inclination is to downgrade itself, and, as in the case of the foot, not only miss its own true fulfillment but impair the life of the whole body. Paul also refers to the nose in the comparisons. Again we do not find the nose as a celebrated part of the body being referred to in poetry and prose. As a part of the face it can be a beautiful member or it can be an object of deri-

sion. But Paul says if the body was one organ, it would be no body at all. It would be a monstrous distortion of the divine intention. Important as the eye may be, it would be terribly handicapped without the hearing and, important as hearing is, the body would be seriously deprived without the sense of smell.

So by personalizing the members of the body, and illustrating the self-deprecating language of the less celebrated members, Paul warns Christians that they must not indulge in self-downgrading, for in so doing they charge God with having placed them unfairly, and also obstruct the proper functioning of the Body.

DIVINE PLACEMENT

Probably the most serious factor in downgrading one's self as a member of the Body of Christ is that it expresses disagreement with the sovereign purpose of God in placing the member where he is. "Now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, *just as He desired*" (1 Cor. 12:18). It is a very serious thing for anyone in the Body of Christ to feel that because he is not in a place of prominence he is of little value to the Body, and consequently succumb to discouragement or despondency. Rather he should recognize that God has placed him where he is for reasons best known to Him, and should walk in joyful submission to God's sovereign placement. "The high dignity of each member appears from the thought that it is God Himself who has placed it in the Body, and placed it where it is best."¹

DOWNGRADING OTHERS

Paul continues to personalize the members and give them speech as he makes reference to the eye, which he says "cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'; or again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'" Here we have a second problem which I am sure we all recognize — the problem of downgrading others. Paul's choice of members here is most signifi-

cant. First he relates the eye to the hand. Earlier, with the foot speaking to the hand and the ear speaking to the eye, we heard the less celebrated speaking to the more celebrated. Now we have the equally celebrated eye speaking to the equally celebrated hand, which suggests the inclination of leaders to depreciate one another. Unfortunately it is often in the realm of leadership that we find this kind of criticism. A prominent "eye" will say to a prominent "hand," "I have no need of you." It is often much easier for leaders to speak with appreciation to those who are not as prominent as they, than it is for them to speak to their peer group. We believe there is a much-needed lesson here: *leaders must not engage in the sin of downgrading other leadership.*

The second combination, that of the head and the foot, is also significant, for it speaks of the inclination of leaders to spiritual arrogance. This, too, is a danger on the part of those in leadership. Because God has given them a place of prominence in the Body, they constantly face the danger of considering their prominence as something deserved by them. They erroneously regard it as a place of privilege which permits them to lord it over those that are in lesser prominence, often to the point of despising them and thinking that they can get along quite well without them.

DECEIVED BY APPEARANCES

This brings us to a third problem — "the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor" (1 Cor. 12:22-23 NAS). "Seem" and "deem" are the same words in the Greek. The temptation is to make an erroneous judgment concerning certain parts of the Body. Some parts "seem to be weaker," and in our judgment, less "necessary" than other parts. Other parts are "less beautiful" (Conybeare) and these we instinctively "ennoble with more beautiful clothing" (1 Cor.

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ways by His example. He reminded them on several occasions that the servant was not above His Lord. If He could so literally serve, we who call Jesus Lord should so serve even the least members of the Body.

In a real sense, joints are made so that one member can serve another. In our natural body each member serves the others. Such service is transmitted through relationship or joints. In the Body of Christ by serving other members we prove that their best interest is our motive. Then, they will call us into a fellowship of trust and sharing. Such a Body, where members recognize their place, understand their mutual relationships and have a fellowship built around mutual service, will be healthy and happy. It is difficult to find fault with members that are giving themselves for the edification of the Body without regard to their own interest.

Once I knew of such a Body of believers. God had kindled the fires of renewal and the Body had stood the tests of Satan's attack. External attack

had only served to draw them closer together. Day after day they prayed and sought God. The fruit of their faithfulness to God and one another was constantly ripening on the vine. They didn't know much about covenant, but it was there. They didn't understand joints, but they had them. The life that flowed healed them, protected them and provoked them to share with the poor and one another. They were like happy children, experiencing the joy and freedom of genuine life together in God.

Then one day something began to happen. A misunderstanding was not honestly handled. One night the enemy sowed tares in the field. Brothers began to see faults they had never seen before. The smiles were still there, but they were not the smiles of innocent children. The joints got infected, the Body grew stiff and the laughter died away.

One can enjoy the unity of the Body and healthy joints without fully knowing or understanding how it works. Children do. Their little bodies

are so versatile, limber and wonderful. But as they get older keeping healthy bodies becomes an endeavor based on mature understanding and determination. Many people never appreciate health until they have lost it.

As the physical body can become painfully swollen in its joints, so can the Body of Christ. The remedy that Jesus prescribes for this condition is: "Go find your brother. . . ." "How often should we forgive?" Peter asked, "Seven times?"

"Seventy times seven, Peter," Jesus said. Jesus knew it was easier to forgive than to live in a society where the joints are swollen, immobile and painfully infected.

. . . but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love" (Eph. 4:15-16 NAS). ♣

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12:23, A.S. Way). "We cover with a special care some of our members, such as the sex organs and organs of secretion, and in so doing we bestow more honor on them than on other members which we do not cover."² Let us remember that "God has so composed the body" (1 Cor. 12:24 NAS). "The fact that the body is what it is, is due to God's disposal, and we human beings ought not to find fault with it."³ God not only made the human body, but also the Body of Christ, and we must honor His design and purpose for both.

To sum up: if every member of the Body is sensible of its need of every other member, then that member, no matter how prominent it may be in the Body, will see to it that every member receives equal care, for its own existence and usefulness depends on the health of the whole. The one who yields to downgrading himself must remember that God has placed him in the Body and that he is indis-

pensible to the function of the whole. This ought to give him both courage and a sense of spiritual dignity, knowing that since God has placed him where he is, he is as essential to the functioning of the Body as any other part. The one who would downgrade others must realize he is dependent upon the other members. Even though he plays a prominent role, and at times may feel that he needs no one else, he cannot adequately fulfill his prominent role without the support of the rest of the Body. God has so joined the Body together that no one can adopt either of these attitudes without endangering his own life and the total life of the Body. The Body must either function as a whole, or it will function inadequately. "God, in fact, has made a composite whole of the Body, assigning special honor to the part which naturally lacks it, so that there may be no divided interests in the Body, and that its various organs may be united in solicitous care for each other's welfare" (1 Cor. 12:24-25, A.S. Way).

NO COMPETITION

There is no place in the Body for competition. God made you what you are and has given you what you have. Don't compete, contribute! We need each other if we are going to fulfill His divine purpose in the earth. When we are failing to flow with every other member of the Body we are rebelling against God's purpose for His corporate people. We are defeating our own personal destiny. We are injuring other members of the Body of Christ, and are withholding from the world the beautiful corporate "Christ person" that God desires the world to see. "Here is the supreme glory of the Christian man - He is part of the Body of Christ upon earth."⁴ ♣

¹ Godet, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, Vol. II.

² F. W. Grosherde, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 296.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

⁴ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Corinthians*.