

Culture Bible Study 6: **The Ministry of the Body**

Paul's image of the church as the "body of Christ" stems from his first encounter with the living Christ on the road to Damascus:

"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked as he rubbed his eyes and tried to get up off the ground.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

The zealous Saul was punishing Jesus' followers, Jews whom he believed were preaching heresy. But Jesus was saying that by attacking his church, Saul was assaulting Jesus himself. From this point on, Paul's understanding of the church as the actual presence of Christ, with its members organically connected to him and one another, would remain primary in his ministry.

Even though we have the benefit of Scripture and particularly Christ's and Paul's models, we somehow neglect to practice biblical teachings on unity and reconciliation. It has been said that eleven o'clock Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America. While races and cultures sometimes mix in the workplace, they seldom meet in worship. We believe that we are one, yet we actively support a separation that Jesus and Paul harshly criticized in their own day. And most of us are not particularly distressed at this disunity and alienation.

We must remember our identity as the body of Christ and recognize that we have missed out on God's blessing by keeping ourselves separate from one another. Jesus' desire is that his body function together, each member empowering the other in ministry.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-20.

1. By what means do Christians become one body (vv. 12-13)?

2. Verse 13 is an extreme statement. How would the average Jew or Gentile have responded to it?

3. Contextualize verse 13, taking these examples into your campus, church or community. What would be a statement with the same emotional force in these settings as Paul's was in his context?

4. Paul's description of a body that refuses to work as one unit is humorous. Play with this image a little. What attitude do these body parts reflect?
 - 4A. How do they think of their own functions (vv. 15-16)?

 - 4B. Of others' purposes?

5. In relation to race, class and culture, how do these same attitudes manifest themselves in you?

5A. In your church or fellowship group?

5B. Among your family and friends?

6. Restate Paul's argument for the necessity of each person's being actively involved with other kinds of people (vv. 17-20). Express yourself in language which a young child with no church background could comprehend.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:21-27.

7. Why do you think one particular group of Christians often says by its actions to another group, "I do not need you"?

8. Paul speaks here about weaker parts or parts we consider less honorable. On the whole, what groups of people do you think we—because of cultural or racial prejudices—consider "weak"?

9. How does Paul encourage you to respond to the people in your church or fellowship who have no voice (vv. 22-23)?

10. From what Paul says in verses 24-26, why must we break down walls of separation or hostility?

11. *Response:* Look again at verse 26. Consider those in the church who suffer because of their race or culture. (Think, for example, of the economic injustices that are still all too prevalent among certain ethnic groups.) How can you become more deeply connected to even those parts of the body?

Pray that you and your church or fellowship might begin to live as reconciled, unified members of Christ's body actively carrying out a ministry of reconciliation.

This study is available online at: www.intervarsity.org/ism/article/8220