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What Unites the Generations: Biblical Perspectives
Context in Corinth

Many of you probably use a tour book to plan a vacation or during your travels. In the second century A.D., long before the American Automobile Association published such resources, a man named Pausanius wrote a travel journal titled The Description of Greece. On his visit to Corinth he described the temple of Asclepius, the Greek god of healing. Pausanius noted that when people received healing at the temple, they often responded by placing a terra cotta figure of the particular body part that had been healed on a wall dedicated to the god. Archaeologists have confirmed this by finding numerous sculpted pieces of various body parts there.¹

St. Paul's favorite way to describe the Christian community is to compare it to the human body. Paul uses that analogy in Romans 12, in 1 Corinthians 12, throughout Ephesians and in Colossians. In Romans and Corinthians, the emphasis is on the functioning of believers within a local community; Ephesians and Colossians speak of the church in a more universal sense and stress, respectively, how the one body is joined together and joined to its head, Jesus Christ.² 1 Corinthians is generally regarded as the earliest of those letters. It is also the one that expounds upon the analogy in detail. As a result, it will be the main focus of this article.

It is impossible for us to discern specifically what prompted Paul to utilize this picture repeatedly. Acts 18 tells us of his 18-month stay in Corinth prior to the time he wrote multiple letters to that community. This means that he certainly knew of the temple described years later by Pausanius. I would suggest the temple's memorial wall, full of single and separate body parts, provided the negative visual image Paul used to characterize the Corinthian community in his first letter to them. They were behaving like the dismembered body parts on the temple wall they had all seen. But, once turned positive, the image of a whole and healthy human body was so vibrant and effective that Paul continued to use it in three letters.

The image of dismembered body parts unfortunately described the Corinthian church all too well. Paul's opening words reveal how they were divided by allegiance to various teachers (1:12, the topic of 1 Corinthians 1-4). Later, he indicates there were also factions between rich and poor (11:21-22), largely determined by whether one was slave or free. Chapters 12-14 reveal that the Corinthians were further segmented by their attraction to the more ostentatious spiritual gifts, particularly speaking in tongues.

In response to this, Paul uses the image of the human body to make these points:³

- For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body .... Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it (12:13,27).
- Now the body is not made up of one part but of many .... As it is, there are many parts, but one body (12:14,20).
- In fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be (12:19).
- God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other (12:24-25).

These truths are then applied to relationships within the Christian community. As the human body has many different parts, so believers have a variety of spiritual gifts (12:11-12). Each one is needed for the body to be whole and healthy. Individual believers should not look down on others (12:21), neither should they deprecate or exclude themselves (12:15-16). Instead, the marvelous words of 1 Corinthians 13 illustrate how believers should receive and use any and all of these gifts in love (12:31).

Paul's overall message is this: “There are many parts, but one body” (12:20). So, which is it, unity or diversity? For Paul the answer is an

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emphatic "both/and," and he insists that both poles be properly balanced.

This kind of paradox may seem uncomfortable, but it should also feel very familiar to Lutherans. We speak of the polarities of Law and Gospel, saint and sinner, left-hand kingdom and right-hand kingdom, body and bread, wine and blood, and so forth. Indeed, this lively vitality is in many ways the genius of the Lutheran expression of biblical theology. But it also leaves us with unresolved tension in trying to maintain and properly balance both sides of the equation.

**Diversity**

What does all of this have to say about ministry among the generations in our day and culture? On the one hand, diversity was and remains a vital aspect of the Christian community. As with the diverse parts of the human body, so the congregation has different parts, different roles, different gifts and different functions. All of these are needed for the body to function in a healthy, God-intended manner.

It is interesting that one of the dominant forms of segmenting done in congregations today involves an area Paul does not even mention, that of age. The issue is addressed at some length in two of his pastoral letters, and we will return to it shortly. However, here are the areas specifically identified by Paul:

Paul points out that all those in the Corinthian congregation were baptized into one body, "whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free" (12:13). The first distinction he notes formed the dominant theological issue of the first century. Paul resolves it by revealing "the mystery of Christ ... that through the Gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body" (Ephesians 3:6; cf. Acts 15; Galatians 2; Romans 2-3). The second, "slave or free," was dictated by place in society. Paul had earlier asserted that it was good if slaves could win their freedom (7:21). But remaining an earthly slave should not be troublesome (7:20-24). Instead, "each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him" (7:17). It is important to note that even within the unity of one body, these two distinctions largely remained. People were still ethnically Jew or Greek and, for the most part, stayed slave or free.

In Galatians 3, Paul makes a parallel statement about unity and diversity in Christ. There he adds a third area: gender. "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (3:27-28). The addition reinforces the point. People remain male or female even as they are one in Christ. Similarly, we are Hispanic or Caucasian or African or Asian; there are rich and poor among us, bosses and employees, and so forth. All this diversity is to be celebrated because it strengthens the body and enables it to function in God-pleasing ways.

Due to the context in Corinth, a fourth area, spiritual gifts, is discussed throughout chapters 12-14. On the one hand, Paul makes some distinctions among them. He elevates the priority of gifts that share and spread the word (apostles, prophets and teachers; 12:28). Chapter 14 asserts that prophecy is particularly valuable because it builds up or edifies the church (14:3-4, 12).

In spite of distinctions among various gifts (charismata), Paul’s main emphasis is revealed when he uses the body metaphor briefly in Romans. "We have different gifts according to the grace given us" (12:6). Indeed, "all these are the work of one and the same Spirit" who baptized each and every member into the one body (1 Corinthians 12:11; cf. 12:4,13). Whatever gifts are given to whomever, they are all to be "exercised" within the body in a way which seeks to build up others.

While describing all this diversity, Paul points out how different parts of the human body are cared for differently. "The parts that we think are less honorable, we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty" (12:23-24). As a result, it is altogether appropriate to have special activities that target and, in that sense, treat different parts of the body differently.
This brings us back to the topic of generations. All that has been said thus far applies. Just as with different ethnicities, genders, and social or economic classes, all age groups are to be welcomed and cherished because the Spirit baptizes them all into the one body. Whatever gifts are given by the Spirit, these should also be freely exercised within the body regardless of age. At the same time, distinctions between generations continue to exist within that unity.

Is it then appropriate to segment a congregation’s focus or activities toward particular age groups within a congregation? On the one hand, the answer is obviously affirmative. While not directed specifically at generational distinctions, Paul’s words about treating different parts of the body differently lend support to a positive response. Paul further illustrates this in the pastoral epistles when he tells Timothy, “Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity” (1 Timothy 5:1-2). Paul himself goes on to direct how elderly widows should be treated in a manner different from younger widows (cf. 1 Timothy 5:3-10 with 11-16; see also Titus 2:3-8).

As a result, having various activities aimed at caring for and nurturing certain parts of the body in ways most beneficial to them is in keeping with Paul’s words. A second grade Sunday school class is one example. But rather than age being the sole criterion, levels of maturity and reading ability are perhaps more significant. And even there, the teacher is not a second grader (hopefully!) and, as such, intergenerational work is going on in the class. A junior high ministry, senior citizen activities, youth gatherings, a group for mothers of young children and so forth are all good. But, once again, one may question whether age should be the sole criterion. Furthermore, each of these examples tends to involve a wider span of ages than the specifically targeted group (for example, youth group counselors or babysitters for children at a young mothers’ Bible study).
At the same time, many activities within the body can target those with special interests, gifts and abilities, regardless of, or precisely because they transcend, any specific age group. These multi-generational activities are outstanding illustrations of what the body is, a community into which all ages have been incorporated by the work of the Spirit in baptism. For example, all Christians are called to serve as we have been served (Galatians 5:13); we are able to do so in a wide variety of roles with our various gifts regardless of age. Servant events like mission trips typically draw together a wide range of ages due to common interests and abilities. Music groups (e.g. choirs, handbells, praise teams) draw in people from a variety of generations. If any age restrictions are placed upon participation in these activities, aside from legal issues, those should be re-examined.

On the other hand, is it proper to adopt certain practices because they will attract those of a particular generation who are outside of the body to come in? Is it appropriate for a congregation to target its outreach, worship or teaching style, social activities and, in essence, its entire ministry toward reaching a particular age group? To some degree this is also probably inevitable due to the demographic makeup of a community (such as a college campus, new housing developments occupied by young families, and retirement communities). It is certainly positive when a particular body of believers is reaching out into the context where they have been placed. A congregation should also be willing to continually evaluate and adapt its outreach as the “neighborhood” changes.

Whatever targeting is done, whether this be in terms of race, ethnicity, place in society, spiritual gifts, or age, it should be in a manner that shows the same concern for all those present in a given location. Can you imagine, for instance, Paul deliberately and specifically targeting the gathering of a congregation which was dominantly Jewish or slave or male? Instead, he earlier told the Corinthians, “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (9:22). To be sure, he modified
his behavior to reach certain groups (9:20-22). But in doing so, he did not ignore or disregard those outside one targeted group. On the contrary, he sought to reach "all" whom he encountered; his goal was to bring them together into one body.

A ministry may target Millennials, for example, and the body of believers in that place may come to be dominated by those of that generation. But if those of other age groups are present, they should receive "equal concern" (12:25). In the same way, a congregation ought not be dominated by "the old guard." Instead, all those present should receive the opportunity to have an equal voice and role.

The major caveat in all this is that once various members are present within the body of Christ at a particular place, they ought not to be favored or neglected because of ethnicity, gender, social status or age. In describing how body parts are treated differently, Paul explains why God arranged the body with all its various parts as he did. It was "so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other" (1 Corinthians 12:25).

Unity

Some in our society assert that there is unity in diversity. Paul contends that this order is backwards. In the body of Christ, unity does not come from our diversity. Instead, there is diversity in unity. Unity is the determining factor. "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body" (12:13). But, yes, within that unity we find diversity.

Can one target a specific age group within a congregation? Of course, but this must be balanced with the other pole, which is the most essential for Paul. The body of Christ is a place where unity does not dismiss distinctions, but it is a community where they are transcended. The fact that a community of believers is one body is the very essence of the church. "Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it" (12:27). In Corinth, this was a fact in spite of their behavior because their oneness was based upon God's action and the work of his Spirit.
in baptism (12:13; cf. 1:27-28). The body of Christ “is what it is,” and it is comprised of all baptized believers in the community.

This aspect needs the most stress in our consumer-driven culture of individualism and choice. In response to individualism, whenever Paul talks about “you” as the body of Christ, the “you” is always plural in Greek. In other words, “you” (singular) are not the body of Christ; rather, as Texans say it, “y’all” or, even better, “all y’all” are collectively and corporately (cf. 12:14-16, 21, 26-27). American society also treasures its freedoms. Thank God we have the freedom to choose in many areas of life, including freedom to gather as the body of Christ. Culturally, this extends to the freedom to choose denominations, to choose a particular congregation within that denomination, and to choose to join or withdraw as one wills. The Corinthians did not have such a choice. There was one Christian community in Corinth, and if you were baptized, you were part of it. Nevertheless, the words of Ephesians 4 still ring true in our day. “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4-6).

So how do we “keep the unity of the Spirit” (Ephesians 4:3) and express this oneness in our day? At least within a congregation, it would seem best for all parts of the body to be welcomed at worship together. In contrast to the first century, the size of many congregations today makes this physically impossible, though the “welcome” should always be there for all. The presence of different language groups within a worshipping community presents another legitimate reason to consider separate services. In our day we have commonly chosen to further segment into worshipping groups called “traditional” or “contemporary,” as well as a number of other labels. Studies have shown that the majority of growing churches offer multiple formats from which worshippers are free to choose. This suits our cultural context of choice, but does it support the body picture? If it is an effort to nurture separate parts of the body differently because they need special care, this may be appropriate. But does it not also tend to segment a community, often predominantly by age? If so, are the two poles properly in balance?

At least we can say that heaven will be a wonderful mix of “both/ands” where those “from every nation, tribe, people and language” (and age) are present (Revelation 7:9). I doubt separate traditional and contemporary services will be held there. And those labels largely present a false alternative even in the present age. “Blended, but not like from a blender” sounds more like the body of Christ as depicted by Paul. Various parts retain their identity, but act together as one under their common head. We are certainly free in Christ to worship “in many and various ways,” but I think we are called to worship together as the body of Christ. This may mean some compromise within a Christian community where all parts of the body say, “I seek to be nurtured by that which feeds and edifies me most effectively, but I will also joyfully participate in some of what I may not prefer for the benefit of other parts of the body. In so doing, I may even be reached and grow in ways I did not expect.” This attitude sounds like a “1 Corinthians 13” love which does not insist on its own way.

Finally, 1 Corinthians 12 and the image of the body flow straight out of Paul’s use of the term in the last half of 1 Corinthians 11. There he uses “body” in a couple of different, but interrelated, ways. This is evident already in Chapter 10 where Paul writes, “Is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (10:16b-17). In those two sentences Paul uses the term “body” in two senses. The first refers to the body of Christ in the Lord’s Supper; the second describes the many who shared together as one body in that meal. They were one body because the Spirit had baptized them into the body of Christ (12:13). The one body was then invited to receive the body of their one Lord together as one. As it was in Corinth, so it is today.
Conclusion

In response to issues which sought to divide the Corinthians of old and amidst the challenges of ministering to different generations today, the final words of 1 Corinthians 12 move us forward: "And now I will show you the most excellent way" (12:31). The original context of 1 Corinthians 13 speaks directly to the issue at hand. The chapter also uses the metaphor of age to contrast spiritually childish behaviors with those of a mature believer (13:11).

How do the many parts properly function as one body? Even "grown up" intellect will not provide all the answers. Paul reminds us that we now know only "in part" (13:12), and that knowledge tends to puff up self; love, on the other hand, strives to build up others (8:1; cf. 14:12). "The most excellent way" for all generations is to live out the self-sacrificial agape love depicted so powerfully in 1 Corinthians 13:4–8 and, most importantly, by Him who first loved us, Christ our Head. That is how His one body, with all its diversity, "grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work" (Ephesians 4:16).

Footnotes

2 See Ephesians 1:23; 2:16; 4:12, 16; 5:30; Colossians 1:18, 24; 2:19; 3:15.
4 Unfortunately, confusion regarding the definition of this term has led us to devalue it in our churches today. Just who is a prophet and who prophesies according to the definition given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14? The application is certainly much broader than simply predicting the future. I would suggest it entails all the ways God’s Word and will are applied to people in their particular setting. Thus it happens regularly from the pulpit, but also in Sunday school classrooms, through music ministries, at home, and in many and various places where Christian education and edification occur.

5 In this regard, it has always seemed a little odd that confirmed members of congregations are often restricted from certain activities or roles until they reach the age of 18. Is there any Scriptural basis for this?

6 The Roman Catholic parish model is more illustrative of what it means to be the body of Christ in a particular place, but our culture militates against it so much that it is difficult to comprehend how it could be implemented.

7 See Michael Middendorf, “False (?) Dichotomies in Worship” in Crosstalk, Volume 5:3, Concordia Publishing House, July 2000. For example, a new wow CD of “contemporary” Christian songs is comprised of all hymns (wow Hymns: EMI Christian Music Group, 2007). A “contemporary” service I recently attended was led by a typical praise band, yet four of their songs were Hark the Voice of Jesus Calling, My Hope is Built on Nothing Less, Children of the Heavenly Father and All Hail the Power of Jesus Name. This mix of “traditional” hymns together with a number of other “contemporary” songs was presented within the basic liturgical structure most Lutherans would readily recognize.

8 As a result, what we see in our Bibles as a new chapter, 1 Corinthians 12, flows very logically from the discussion that concludes Chapter 11 (remember, chapter divisions were added long after Paul wrote). In 11:27 Paul speaks of sinning against "the body and blood of the Lord." This refers to a misuse of Christ’s body in the Lord’s Supper. But, as 1 Corinthians 12 makes clear, he also envisions the believers in Corinth as one body of Christ with many members. The problems identified by Paul in 11:17–22 are more relational than doctrinal. Thus, their failure to discern or recognize "the body" in verse 29 refers to their lack of regard for one another within the body of believers as they come to share in the body and blood of the Lord.