



The Church as a Body as God has Arranged

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but we must act locally***

September is the month when life returns to its regular routines, including the life of the church, with the resumption of meetings, catechism classes, and many other activities. It is a good time to reflect on the way the Apostle Paul compares the church to a body in 1 Corinthians 12. It is not only good, but very necessary. There is the constant danger of losing sight of the church as a body where God has arranged the members of this body (1 Cor 12:18). We will first briefly review the point Paul is making by calling the church a body, before moving on to some implications and applications.

Body language

When you read through 1 Corinthians 12, you quickly learn that Paul uses body language to impress on his readers the unity of the church. From the first chapter of this letter, it is obvious that there was a lack of unity in Corinth. Paul indicates that as a body has many members, so the many members of the church form one body. In verse 13, Paul mentions the unity in the Spirit among members of different ethnic and social backgrounds. He writes this after having pointed out how the Spirit has given a variety of spiritual gifts and abilities for the common good, or, we could say, for the good of the body. It is the diversity in a body that is essential for it to function. As it is made clear that there is great diversity in the church ethnically, socially, and in terms of abilities, Paul brings out that this diversity is the work of God. When he concludes speaking of spiritual gifts, he writes that the Spirit *"apportions to each one individually as he wills"* (v. 11). A little further, he writes, *"But as it is, God arranged the members of the body, each one of them as he chose"* (v. 18). A few verses later, after having explained how there are more and less presentable parts in the church, just as in a body, he writes, *"But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another"* (v. 24, 25).

With this basic information fresh in our mind, we can consider some implications and applications for our life as local churches.

Act locally

First, Paul is not speaking of the Catholic Church, but the local church. Paul's words impress on us that as a body is a very distinct entity, with many parts belonging to a very specific body, so believers belong to a particular congregation. This is important to stress over against the idea that if you believe in Jesus, you belong to his church, but there is no need for attachment to a specific local congregation. When it comes to the church, we may think globally (catholic), but we must act locally. As body parts can't exist in isolation from the body, believers can't exist in isolation from a local church body.

Some may question this by pointing to a man like the Ethiopian eunuch, or those who come to faith while imprisoned, or in some place where there are no other believers, but we are speaking here of the norm. Members of the body can't exist apart from others. The general principle is that those who come to know Christ usually do so through contact with other believers, and those who come to know the Lord will desire to be part of the local body of Christ.

Following God's leading

Second, we have to think through how God arranges the members of the body as he chooses. If we look at our own bodies, each part has been designed by God and put into the specific package of our body. We didn't go shopping in the body parts store. It is God who has made us male or female. In God's providence, we are born as member of a certain ethnic group. It is God who has assigned us our abilities. We are called to work with who we are and what God has given us and the parts of our body have to fulfill their role.

This is true for the body of the church as well. In Old Testament times, God's people were organized by tribes, clans, and families. In the New Testament age, churches were established in specific cities. Paul wrote his letters to specific bodies of believers. If you lived in Corinth, you belonged to the church at Corinth. We could say that God used the geographic principle for local church bodies.

This geographic principle prevailed for much of history. You see it reflected in the idea of a parish. In other parts of Europe, they may have used different words, but the idea was the same. A parish was a certain territory. If you lived in that territory, you belonged to the church in that territory. This principle was maintained in the Reformation. This made good sense too, for when you have to walk everywhere, you are not going to walk further than necessary.

Scenario 1

There will be challenges in following this pattern in our time which has a severe case of Protestant split-ends. One wonders, though, if the principle that God arranges the members of the body as he chooses is applied as faithfully as possible as we live together as a church federation. For instance, when a congregation experiences the blessing of growth to the point that it is decided to institute a new congregation, generally, the division is drawn along geographic lines. At the same time, people are given a choice to join the newly instituting church or remain a member of the original congregation, even though they live in the territory of the new congregation. Someone may say, "I have been a member there all along," or, "some of my children are there," or, "I've been part of a new church two times already, I don't want to do it again," or, "I like the minister we have just fine," or some other reason. It may all sound nice and well, and consistories will want to be compassionate, but, the truth is that now members arrange themselves into a body.

We can also see this in situations where people move into the territory of another congregation, not too far from their previous congregation. They may have reasons for staying. Or, they move into the territory of a certain congregation, but there are other congregations not that far away. They may also have reasons for not wanting to join the congregation into whose territory they have moved. Perhaps it is too liberal for their liking, or too conservative. Perhaps the minister of the congregation does not have the pizzazz they are used to. It may be too small, and for them size means something. It may not offer enough programs. Whatever it may be, it is the case that it is no longer God who arranges, but members arrange themselves.

Scenario 2

Another example comes to mind, when a church is organized not according to geography but mindset. It is visional, rather than spatial. Perhaps in a large congregation, a significant number would really like to worship using the A liturgy, and have the minister assign no more than one hymn per service. Further, they only want members who are well versed in all Reformed doctrines, and who are engaged in political activism. In another situation, a significant number thinks they can address the size issue in a congregation by gathering all those who are mission minded. In neither case is the organizing principle geographic. It is not the case that God arranges a body, but likeminded people arrange a body. What we, in effect, have now is a genetically modified body, no longer showing the diversity of the body. It has an excess of certain parts, at the expense of others that don't suit its vision of the body. In fact, they don't want members who don't share their vision. We might even be able to label such churches as "designer churches." Whatever the situation may

be, a church is no longer organized spatially but visionally. In situations like that, it is very well possible that members of the same church federation pass each other on Sunday morning, going to the church of their choice.

A matter of the heart

I realize I may have hit a sensitive nerve in the two scenarios. Yet, I trust that as readers, you will grant the point that Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 12 describe the way it should be, the ideal. One could counter that in this life, we deal with the real. If we would pursue ideal, it would cause a lot of grief, with consistories setting border lines and enforcing them. I assure you that I know the real and the grief. I've had my share of border incidents.

What I would plead for is that we have a look at our heart. It is a matter of the heart to humbly bow before God's Word. Through his servant Paul, God has taught us that he arranges the members of the church body, just as he arranges the members of our physical body. When it comes to our physical body, the parts have no choice but to cooperate. That's the point that also comes out when it comes to being members of the body of a local church. You look around and see who God has put together. It is an amazing mix of people, ethnically, socially, as well as in terms of talents and abilities. As it is an amazing mix, it is also an awkward mix of sinners being sanctified. It should not escape our notice that the chapter about the church as a body is followed by the chapter about the greatest gift, love. We need to look around at those whom the Lord has gathered into a local body and impress upon ourselves: These are the ones Christ loves, these are the members of his body at this place. And then we should tell ourselves: Let me know do my utmost to live together in love and harmony with them, to do my part to build up this body.

As we head into another busy season, let us strive to live as a Spirit regenerated body of believers, the body *God* has arranged as *he* chose.

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