

ROMANS XLVII: TRUE MEMBERS

Douglas Wilson

Christ Church - Moscow, ID

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INTRODUCTION:

Paul now moves into a discussion of body life—a theme he treats in detail elsewhere as well (1 Cor. 12-14). This body life is organic and alive, and is not to be confused with simple administrative organization, although it is organized. With living organisms, the organizational principle arises from below, and is not imposed externally. A body forms in obedience to the mysterious instructions that come from the double helix; a body does not form because someone pushed PlayDough into a mold. This is just another way of noting the difference between conforming and transforming that we saw in the verses just prior to this.

THE TEXT:

“For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering: or he that teacheth, on teaching; Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness” (Rom. 12:4-8).

SUMMARY OF THE TEXT:

Paul now outlines how the body works. He says first that the one body has many members (v. 4). Each distinct member is set apart by this—each does not have the same office or function as the other members (v. 4). Their loyalties are the same, but their functions are different. So then, the many are one body in Christ, and this means that each member is a member of the other members (v. 5). Different gifts have been assigned to different members (which is what makes them different members) and these gifts differ according to the grace given (v. 6). If God has given the prophetic gift, then prophesy—but only according to the proportion of faith (v. 6). More about this shortly. If the gift is ministry, then minister; if teaching, then teach (v. 7). Exhorters should exhort (v. 8). Givers should give with simplicity and without guile (v. 8). Those who rule should be diligent in that rule (v. 8). The one who is gifted to show mercy, should take care to be cheerful in his pursuit of that duty (v. 8).

WHAT A MEMBER IS:

We have made an unfortunate error in our modern tendency to define membership as simple inclusion on a roster of names. And so when we think of church membership, we tend to think of a list of names at the church office, as so many units in a mathematical set. As C.S. Lewis points out, this is “almost the reverse of what St. Paul meant by members.” He goes on: “By members . . . he meant what we should call organs, things essentially different from, and complementary to, one another: things different not only in structure and function but also in dignity.” A good illustration of membership would be a household with a crotchety uncle, mom and dad, three kids, a dog and a cat. As Lewis points out, the whole point is that not one of these members is interchangeable.

CAUTION IN THE RIGHT AREAS:

How many gifts are mentioned here? We know from elsewhere in the New Testament that there are more gifts than these, so this list is not exhaustive. At the same time, in a certain way these gifts are representative of all gifts. There are seven gifts mentioned here: prophesy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, generosity, rule, and mercy. Some of those who are gifted here are exhorted to simply discharge their office. Others are cautioned against a particular temptation they might encounter while they discharge their office.

- Prophesy—the prophetic gift can be immediate, as with the prophets of old who were inspired by God, or it can be mediated, as a man declares the Word of God as found in Scripture. The former would be a man like Isaiah; the latter a man like John Knox. In the Reformed tradition, preaching is understood as a prophetic office, but only in this latter sense. So the one who prophesies must do so in accordance with his proportion of faith. It is noteworthy that faith was just mentioned previously (v. 3) as a bulwark against conceit.

- Ministry—the Greek word here indicates the diaconal office (diakonia). So the deacons should be given to diaconal ministry—service to the body.
- Teaching—this is the explanation of God’s Word, as distinct from the authoritative declaration of it. Teachers should explain, making things clear, in Bible studies and in classrooms.
- Exhortation—the one who has the gift of exhortation should exhort and encourage.
- Generosity—some are gifted in giving, and they should simply overflow.
- Rule—this refers to what we call the ruling elder, or parish elder. He is to have rule in the church, and he is not to put things on cruise control. He is charged to be diligent.
- Mercy—those who are gifted in the showing of mercy are exhorted to do so, but to do so with cheerfulness. It is a striking fact that mercy work can veer very quickly into censoriousness and dour pride. Why was this perfume not sold and given to the poor?

HOW WE USE OUR EYES:

Each member will tend to view the condition of the body at large through the interpretive lens of his own gifts. If it is critical of others, Paul cuts this tendency off. We should use our gifts to identify what we should be doing, not what everybody else should be doing. The eye should not fault the elbow for being blind, and the elbow should not fault the backbone for not having a hinge. The deficiencies in the church that you see should be used by you as a spur to pursue and develop your gifts. If you see discouraged people, encourage them. If you see ignorance, teach. If you see hurting people, show mercy cheerfully. And at the same time, don’t think of yourself more highly than you ought (v. 3). The toenail is not the brain, and the eye is not the back of the knee.

HERE AM I:

Gifts are cultivated from below, as already noted. And as we worship God (Here am I, Lord, send me), He knits us together, as we are engaged in growing up together—patiently and joyfully.



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