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## HUMILITY IN THE FUNCTIONING BODY

Romans 12:3-4

By

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May 6, 2012

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May 6, 2012  
Romans, Lesson 79

## Humility in the Functioning Body Romans 12:4-5

Unless you're an airplane buff, you probably don't recognize the name, Charles Lawrence. He is credited with developing the engine for "The Spirit of St. Louis," the aircraft that Charles Lindbergh flew non-stop from Long Island to Paris in 1927.

After Lindbergh's record-setting flight, friends of Lawrence held a dinner in honor of his achievement. At the dinner, in response to all the attention being lavished on him, he made this humble comment: "This is nice, and I appreciate it very much, but who ever heard of Paul Revere's horse?" (Source unknown)

Lawrence's comment reflects the humility with which the church, the body of Christ, should function. Some members, like Lindbergh, are more prominent and get the attention. But without the behind the scenes work of a man like Charles Lawrence, Lindbergh never could have gotten off the ground. And for the proper functioning of the body of Christ, there have to be dozens of faithful servants humbly working behind the scenes, who don't care about getting the glory. Their desire is to make the church be all that God wants it to be.

The apostle Paul is showing us how the life of sacrificial service (12:1) plays out in ministry to others. At the heart of the properly functioning body of Christ the members must not be conformed to this evil age, but be transformed by the renewing of their minds (12:2). The renewed mind will not think more highly of itself than it ought to think, but will think with sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith (12:3). In other words, each member will not arrogantly think that he is better or more important than others. But also, he will not despise the gifts that God has given to him, however insignificant they may seem. He will humbly exercise them for the good of the body and the glory of God. So Paul now (12:4-8) shows how humility operates in the functioning body of Christ. He is saying that humility requires that we recognize the concept of the body of Christ (12:4-5); and that we function in the area of our own gifts (12:6-8).

In 12:4-5 Paul briefly sets forth the concept of the church as the body of Christ, which is one of several New Testament analogies used to describe the church. (Paul develops this in much more detail in 1 Cor. 12:12-27; also, Eph. 1:22-23; 4:15-16; Col. 2:19). Then in 12:6-8, he mentions, by way of example, seven spiritual gifts that function in the body, making the point that those who possess these gifts must exercise them faithfully in order for the body to function properly. No one member possesses all the gifts, and thus we're all interdependent. To the extent that the members of a local church do not recognize the concept of the body and faithfully function as humble members of the body, that church will be dysfunctional. But when the members of a church faithfully exercise their gifts with humility, that church will be healthy. Today we can only look at 12:4-5, where Paul makes the point that...

Humility requires that we recognize and function within the concept of the body of Christ.

Romans 12:4-5: "For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another."

"For" shows that Paul is explaining further the implications of 12:3. We think with sound judgment and proper humility when we recognize that we're only a part of the one body of Christ and that we're members of one another. Just as the human body doesn't function well when only a few members work, so neither does the body of Christ. All the members must work together in humility. The analogy of the church as the body of Christ implies five truths:

1. The body of Christ is an organic unity, made up of diverse members.

The church is the community of all who believe in Jesus Christ during the New Testament era. Covenant theologians extend the church to include all believers of all time, including those who believed under the old covenant. While the Greek word for church or assembly, *ekklesia*, is used once in the New Testament of the entire nation of Israel in the wilderness (Acts 7:38), I believe that there are some important distinctions between Israel and the New Testament church.

Israel was a national, ethnic group made up of both believers and unbelievers. The church, in its truest sense, is a spiritual group made up of believers from many ethnic nations. In Israel, even those who believed are never described as belonging to the body of Christ. The church in this sense came into being on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit baptized all who believe in Christ into the one body of Christ (Acts 1:5; 1 Cor. 12:13). Membership in Israel was due to one's physical birth. But as I'll mention in the next point, membership in the church is due to one's spiritual birth.

I agree there is only one true people of God, consisting of all who believe in Christ whether in the Old or New Testament eras. But I would contend that there is a difference, even between believers in both eras. Old Testament saints were not a part of the living, organic body of Christ, baptized by the Spirit into this one body, with Jesus Christ as Head. And if you compare the entire nation of Israel with the church, the differences are even greater. The nation of Israel was a physical, ethnic entity, containing both unbelievers and believers. The church is a spiritual organic entity, containing only believers.

I'll say more about the unity of the church in a moment, but for now I will point out that at its essence, the church is not an organization, but rather an organism. Organisms are highly organized, but in addition, they have life. Connected vitally to Jesus Christ as our head, the church shares His life in us. This means:

2. We become members of the body through the new birth, which unites us to all other regenerated people.

To use another analogy for the church, when a person is born again, he is born into God's family. All other believers become his brothers or sisters. While I think that there is a legitimate place for having a defined membership in a local church, at its most basic level you do not become a member of the church by going to a new members' class, filling out an application, being interviewed by an elder, and being formally welcomed into the church. You become a member of the church by believing in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. The membership process is to help the elders to ensure that all who join the church have a credible profession of faith in Christ. But the point is, you don't become a member of the church as the body of Christ by natural birth, but by the new birth.

In my judgment, those that view the church as an extension of or replacement for Israel and view baptism as the replacement for circumcision inevitably get into trouble because they have many in membership who have not been born again. These people were born in the church, baptized as infants, confirmed by going through a catechism class, and welcomed into the membership of the church as adults without a credible profession of faith in Christ.

Eventually, the church becomes like Israel, a mixed multitude with many who have never trusted in Christ as Savior. Thus many of these denominations now accept practicing homosexuals as clergy and deny many cardinal doctrines of the faith. At its root this is because they have not recognized that the fundamental basis of membership in a local church is the new birth through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, not physical birth into the covenant community.

I grant that even local churches such as ours that insist on the new birth as the basis for membership have some who slip through the cracks. They have become official members, but they have never truly been born again. We try to prevent this through the membership process, but we cannot know a person's heart. But our aim is to limit the membership of the church to those who have been born again. That is how we become members of the church universal. We try to apply that to the local level.

3. The church as the body of Christ means that God has not called us to be Christians in isolation, but in relationship with one another.

In other words, the church is not just a place where you come, as you would to a theater, to watch a show and then leave without much if any interaction with other attenders. Or, a church is not like a college classroom, where you may know a few of the students, but you only come to hear the lecture, chat with a couple of friends in the hallway after class, and then go your own ways. The church is a body, which implies a deeper level of contact and interaction than the theater or classroom comparisons provide.

A body does not do well when its members are not connected with one another. My fingers only work when connected with my hands and my hands with my arms and my arms to my body. The whole thing has to be vitally connected with my head. While in a

church that is much larger than 100 people it's impossible to know everyone well, you should have a network of some with whom you go deeper than just saying "hello" on Sunday morning and then not seeing them again for another week. The early church in Jerusalem is our model. It consisted of many thousands of members (Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 6:7). They met at the temple to hear the apostles' teaching, but they also met house to house for interaction on a deeper level (Acts 2:42, 46). The principle of the body means that we need to be developing relationships with some other members of the body for the purpose of mutual growth in Christ.

As you know, we Americans tend to be individualistic. We admire the strong, independent guy who can make it on his own. To depend on others for help is a sign of weakness. But as Christians, we need to fight this tendency. There is a sense in which each believer must bear his own load or be responsible for his own spiritual growth (Gal. 6:5). But there is another sense in which we must bear one another's burdens, because we are members of one another (Gal. 6:2). The principle of the body means that we need each other to grow and stand strong against the enemy. But to admit that and practice it requires humility.

Years ago, Gene Getz wrote a helpful book, *Building Up One Another* [Victor Books, 1976], in which he examined many of the "one another's" in the New Testament. He said (p. 4) that outside of the gospels, there are 58 uses of the Greek word that is usually translated "one another." His 12 chapter headings were:

- (1) "Members of One Another" (Rom. 12:5)
- (2) "Devoted to One Another" (Rom. 12:10)
- (3) "Honor One Another" (Rom. 12:10)
- (4) "Be of the Same Mind with One Another" (Rom. 15:5)
- (5) "Accept One Another" (Rom. 15:7)
- (6) "Admonish One Another" (Rom. 15:14)
- (7) "Greet One Another" (Rom. 16:3-6, 16)
- (8) "Serve One Another" (Gal. 5:13)
- (9) "Bear One Another's Burdens" (Gal. 6:2)
- (10) "Bearing with One Another" (Eph. 4:2)
- (11) "Submit to One Another" (Eph. 5:21)
- (12) "Encourage One Another" (1 Thess. 5:11)

Note that many of these references come from Romans. All of them are specific ways to show love for one another (John 13:34-35). Getz' point is that the New Testament has a strong emphasis on the fact that we are not to be Christians in isolation, but in relationship with one another.

But that's often the rub, isn't it? Relationships often result in misunderstanding, conflict, and hurt feelings, even in the body of Christ. I often meet Christians who have been deeply hurt by fellow believers. Sometimes they drop out of the church altogether because of their bad experience. Or they may attend church, but they refuse to get involved because they don't want to get hurt again. Perhaps some of you hold back from serving in the church because of past bad experiences.

But in this fallen world, even in the body of Christ, relationships always expose you to the risk of getting hurt. I only half-jokingly say to those joining this church that we promise to offend you or hurt your feelings at some point. I hope that it's not intentional, but it's almost inevitable because of our differences and because we're all still prone to sin. When you get men and women (there's serious potential for misunderstanding right there!), of different ages, different cultural and racial backgrounds, and sometimes even different linguistic backgrounds, together and throw in the world, the flesh, and the devil, you've got the potential for conflict and division! But the benefits of loving relationships outweigh the risks of getting hurt.

Someone once described the church as Noah's Ark: You couldn't stand the stench inside if it weren't for the storm outside! Well, it's not that bad! But we do need to keep working at our relationships and growing in love for one another. Separating from one another should only be a last resort and only for serious reasons.

But in light of the thousands of different denominations, you might wonder how Paul can say that we are "one body" (12:5).

4. The unity of the one body of Christ is invisible and spiritual, not outward and organizational.

Paul says (12:5), "We who are many, are one body in Christ." We need to think carefully about what this means. As a pastor, I frequently feel pressure to join with some attempt to bring all the

churches in Flagstaff together in an outward show of unity. It may be a prayer breakfast or a community worship service. I received an invitation to attend the multi-faith prayer service this past week at one of the churches in town. At the bottom of the invitation was the logo for the familiar bumper sticker that has symbols for the world's major faiths, along with the word "Co-exist!" I did not accept that invitation!

The ecumenical movement has tried to bring about outward, organizational unity between various denominations through organizations such as the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches. Although the statements of faith of these organizations sound okay on the surface, in practice they welcome denominations that are liberal and in some cases, heretical. The National Association of Evangelicals attempts to bring more evangelical churches together in some sort of visible, organizational unity.

While there may be some benefits in belonging to an association of like-minded churches for the accomplishment of larger goals (FCF belongs to the Southwest Conservative Baptist Association), we must remember that at its heart, the unity of the body of Christ is invisible and spiritual, not outward and organizational. As I said, it consists of the fact that all who have trusted in Christ have received new life in Him and were baptized by the Spirit into this one body (1 Cor. 12:13). This is a unity that God creates, not one that we create.

In Ephesians 4, Paul speaks of two aspects of this spiritual unity. In verse 3 he exhorts us to be "diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." This is the unity that the Spirit creates. We do not cause it, but we must be diligent to preserve it through humility, gentleness, patience, and tolerance in love (Eph. 4:2). But in verse 12 Paul states that the various gifted leaders are to equip the saints for the work of the ministry and the building up of the body of Christ. Then he adds (4:13), "until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ." This is a unity that we must labor to *attain*, not (as with the unity of the Spirit) to *preserve*. It is not based on our



common faith in Christ alone, but also on our growing knowledge of Christ through God's Word.

So the operative phrase in Romans 12:5 is, "in Christ." We are only unified with those who are truly in Christ through the new birth, which is an inner, spiritual unity. We should strive to show this unity outwardly through love and cooperation when possible. Frankly, it is not always easy to know how and when to display outward unity, because some who are truly born again at the same time hold to some strange doctrines and practices that I would rather not be identified with publicly. If you're interested in pursuing this further, I wrote a paper, "Separation vs. Cooperation" (on the church web site).

Thus humility requires that we think carefully about this concept of the body of Christ. This means that the church is an organic unity, made up of diverse members. We become members of the body through the new birth, which unites us to all other born again people. The church as the body of Christ also implies that God has not called us to be Christians in isolation, but in relationship with one another. And the unity of the one body of Christ is invisible and spiritual, not outward and organizational. Finally,

5. This one body is made up of diverse members, each having different interdependent functions for the well-being of the whole body.

We are "individually members one of another." As Paul elaborates on this (1 Cor. 12:14-21):

For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot says, "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 says, "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? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. If they were all one member, where would the body be? But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no

need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

In other words, we are interdependent and we need one another for the body to function well. But it takes humility to recognize this and make it work, because our pride makes us want to be independent and not let anyone know that we need him or her.

Years ago, I read a touching story that illustrates this truth. During Vacation Bible School, a woman teaching a primary class was interrupted about an hour before dismissal when a new boy was brought in. He only had one arm and the teacher did not know any details about why he was missing his arm or how he may have adjusted to this handicap. She was nervous and afraid that one of the other kids would comment on it and embarrass him. But she had no opportunity to coach them on how to respond.

As the class came to a close without incident, she began to relax. She asked the class to join her in their usual closing ceremony. "Let's make our churches," she said. "Here's the church and here's the steeple, open the doors and see all the ...." Then the awful truth of her own actions hit her. The very thing she had feared the children would do, she had done.

But as she paused, speechless, the little girl sitting next to the new boy reached over with her left hand and placed it up to his right hand and said, "Davey, let's make the church together."

### Conclusion

Without knowing it, that little girl gave us a beautiful picture of how the body of Christ is supposed to function. We shouldn't arrogantly let the person with one hand know that we've got two and that he can't do what we can do. Rather, recognizing our unity as members of the same body and our interdependence as different members of that body, we come alongside one another and say, "Let's make the church together."

## Application Questions

1. How do we draw the proper boundaries between bearing one another's burdens and bearing our own load, between interdependence and independence (Gal. 6:2, 5)?
2. Is there a difference between loving other members of the body and liking them? How does this play out in practice?
3. To what extent and how should we work on visible unity with those who hold to doctrines or practices that we disagree with?
4. Why is church membership important? Or if you think it is not important, why not? Cite biblical reasons.

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