# In the Spirit, we were baptized into one body

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Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship

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1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

The letter that Paul wrote to the church at Corinth that we know as 1 Corinthians is an important one to all Christians. Not only do we get insight into what was happening in the early churches, we also get great insight into how our own churches and our own lives are to be shaped. It is definitely “useful for reproof, for correction, for instructions in righteousness.” Paul founded the church at Corinth, and spent a relatively long time there — a year and a half, longer than he spent at any of the other churches he founded. After he left, the work of leading the church was taken over by Apollos, and it appears that Peter was around, too. It appears that the letter we call 1 Corinthians is one of a flurry of letters that transpired between Paul and the church. In fact, we know Paul wrote at least one letter *before* “first” Corinthians, because he references such a letter in chapter 5. Further, it appears that the church had written to Paul asking him questions; after Paul writes about several topics of concern, he writes (in chapter 7:1), “now, concerning the matters about which you wrote…” It seems clear that Paul is responding to specific questions that members of the church at Corinth had written. They’ve asked questions about sex and marriage, about women’s roles, about dealing with the other religions around them, about the work of the Holy Spirit and which of the manifestations, or gifts, of the Spirit among them were the best.

It is this last question that Paul is answering in this chapter, the first half of which we read last week, and the second half we are reading this week. It starts, “Now, concerning spiritual gifts, I would not have you be ignorant.” Interestingly, the word, “gifts” is not there in the Greek. It reads like this: “Now, concerning ‘the spirituals,’ I would not have you be ignorant.” What are “the spirituals?” It’s likely he meant spiritual gifts, because he begins, in verse 4, to speak of “varieties of gifts.” But it is also possible that he means “spiritual things” or even “spiritual people.” It’s not unlikely that some of the people at Corinth were having these special spiritual manifestations, and they began to be called “the Spirituals” or “the Spiritual Ones” — like we might call those who love nature “the tree huggers” or those who baptize adults even if they have been baptized as children “Anabaptists.”

Earlier in this letter, we see that the very human desire to name groups was alive and well at Corinth. Some called themselves Paulites, some Apolloites, some Peterites — and some of them were even calling themselves Jesusites, more or less based on who baptized them. And Paul strongly warns them about this practice, because the important thing isn’t who baptized them, but that they be in unity and agreement together about what is truly important: the gospel of the good news of the cross of Christ and God’s power to save us.

And so it seems that Paul is returning to this theme in chapter 12. Paul stresses that we are different from one another, but, in really important things, we are the same:

**4**There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. **5**There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.**6**There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

Notice the subtle reference to the Triune God there: different gifts, same Spirit. Different kinds of service, same Lord. Different kinds of work, but the same God and Father. In other words, our differences stem from the different persons of the Trinity, but we are one, not unlike as God is one.

And Paul gives this wonderful analogy to the body — although this is a common analogy for us today, Paul was, as far as I know, the very first person to compare a group of people or an organization to the human body. He notes that our different body parts have different functions, but they function for the good of the whole body, even those parts of the body that are unseen and so, perhaps, don’t get their proper due.

Really, Paul get pretty down-to-earth; it’s not just “heads, shoulders, knees, and toes.” He talks about the unpresentable parts; what we might call the unmentionable bits. There are body parts which modesty commands us to cover, but they are no less important to the body as a whole. I mention this because it signals to me that Paul signals that even differences in gender and sexuality are covered in his image of us as being the body of God. Those whom we might deem as “weak” are indispensible.

We live in a world that not only tolerates differences, but celebrates them. These days, it’s rare to find, even in the church, a group of people who share more similarities than they have differences. Look at our little church — our backgrounds are by no means all Mennonite, but Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Reformed, unchurched, Church of the Brethren … and we are all influenced by the various religious movements and denominations around us; in less than a month, we’ll have a Mennonite pastor teach us about a Roman Catholic practice for Christian formation — and a woman pastor at that! I don’t think we’d have to go very many generations back to find people who were also called Mennonites that would find it difficult to celebrate these differences.

To live in this world of differences, we tend to strive for a “live and let live” attitude. As long as you aren’t affecting me, I should just let you be. In fact, if you are affecting me, I might have to just lump it for the sake of living and letting live. So, in fact, it’s relatively easy for us as a congregation or a denomination to accept the diversity of gifts and differences of persons among us. What’s harder is to remember what it is that unites us.

Paul’s letter to the Corinthians gives us some instructions about this, instructions that we should very much pay attention to. I want to put them in list form, and question form — these are questions that we can ask of ourselves and others to know if we are united, or should be separate.

1. Is their fundamental belief that “Jesus is Lord?” No one can say that, says Paul, unless they are being prompted by the Holy Spirit, as we hope to be. Similarly, if they go in the other direction and curse Jesus, they are not acting by the Holy Spirit.
2. Are they working for the betterment of the whole body of Christ? Paul lays great stress that our individual gifts are not primarily for ourselves, but for the whole body. People who insist on their own way — that is, primarily for their own sake, are suspect. This includes, I think, both people who insist on their own rights at the expense of the body, as well as those who reject others who make them feel uncomfortable.
3. Are they acting out of an attitude of agape, self-giving love? This is the “more excellent way” that Paul refers to in the last verse; we’ll get to read the 13th chapter of this letter — whom some say is Paul’s best writing — next week in the lectionary.
4. Do they address and overcome issues of race, class, and gender? Paul specifically mentions race (Jews and Gentiles) and class (slave and free) in this chapter; elsewhere he also mentions gender (male and female).
5. Are they trying to live a pure and holy life? Do we see the fruits of the Spirit? As I said earlier, Paul wrote a previous letter. In that letter, he told the church at Corinth not to associate with those who are sexual immoral. By this, he didn’t mean avoiding everyone — the “people of the world” — who are sexually immoral. Rather, he meant people in the church who continued to live sexually immoral lives (there was a person, for example, who was living in an incestuous relationship with his mother-in-law). He expands his list to those who are greedy — consumed with getting wealth, idolaters — those who follow other Gods in addition to the Triune God, slanderers — those who constantly speak evil words about others, drunkards — those who continue in dissipation, and swindlers — those who are out to cheat others. This is his list in chapter 5; there are other lists he provides, as well. Because we all fall into sexual misconduct, greed, bad speaking, etc., we need to have good discernment about this, but Paul says this is something we need to do. But more positively, we can look for evidence of the fruits of the Spirit mentioned in the letter to the Galatians (5:23) — love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

I hope this is a helpful list. We seek to be a Spirit-led fellowship, united in serving Jesus, one another, and the world. Is there anything you’d add? Any groups or individuals that you think of when you consider this list?