

United but Diverse

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

High on the list of my boyhood idols is Gary Lineker, regarded by many football fans as one of the finest centre forwards to have played for England. I can still remember my disappointment at the news of his retirement from the sport at the relatively early age of 34. The injury which caused this decision was a broken right toe, which led to him missing almost all of his final season as a professional.

I can still remember my surprise at this news. How, I wondered naively, could such a great athlete be brought down by an apparently insignificant injury? But toes are important, as anyone who's broken or injured one will tell you. As the psalmist knew, our bodies are 'fearfully and wonderfully made' (Ps 139:14), each part connected to the other by nerves, joints and tendons, such that a wound or weakness in one place can impact or incapacitate the whole person.

The importance of each part of the body is the image used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 (and also Romans 12) to convey to early Christians the need to affirm and value each other, in their diversity and for also the contribution made by each member: 'Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ' (1 Cor 12:12).

Paul goes on to explore some important implications of this opening statement. Firstly, as Anthony Thiselton notes, 'it is an affront to Christ if a self-effacing or vulnerable Christian is made to feel second class or alienated, perhaps because he or she does not have what others see as the "right" gifts.'¹ Again, Paul reminds the Corinthians of the role played by each individual believer, memorably conjuring up the image of a body made up only of eyes or ears (v17) with all the obvious limitations that would bring.

The body image also implies the need for each of us to recognise our dependence on others, including those parts deemed to 'less honourable' or 'unpresentable' (v23). Although 1 Corinthians 12 addresses the issue of spiritual gifts, and the extent to which some are deemed more important or impressive than others, Richard Hays has noted that Paul is seeking to address wider divisions within this church: 'It is likely, though not certain, that this split with the community reflects the same social and economic differences that we have seen with regard to other problems in the letter, such as the use of law courts (6:1-8) and the abuse of Lord's Supper (11:17-34).'²

In verse 18, Paul reminds the Corinthians of another reason why no one should think of themselves as superior to anyone else. The different gifts and abilities within the congregation do not reflect innate superiority on the part of certain individuals but,

¹ Anthony Thiselton, *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary*, 2006, 208

² Richard Hays, *Interpretation: First Corinthians*, 1997, 220

rather, the way God has distributed them. The same point is made in the list of rhetorical questions found at the end of the chapter. The use of the word 'gift' in itself reminds the Corinthians that their strengths and abilities are not a credit to themselves but reflect instead the generosity of God and should be used to his glory alone.

1. What gifts and abilities do we tend to consider as being unduly important and which do we have a tendency not to value so highly? Can you think of practical steps we can take to redress this balance within the life of our church?
2. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul addresses the matter of spiritual gifts but, as Richard Hays notes, there were also social and economic divisions within the church in Corinth. Can you think of ways in which the divisions in the community of Selsdon find their way into the life of SBC? What demands does this passage make of those of us who might be considered as socially and economically privileged?
3. In verse 26, Paul writes: 'If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.' In what ways does the suffering or joy in one part of the church impact the whole of the body of believers?
4. A quote attributed to both David Watson and John Wimber says that, 'The gifts of the Spirit are meant as tools for mission in the world, not toys for the church to play with.'³ Can you think of times when you've seen the sort of unhealthy approach to spiritual gifts which is implied in this statement? How can we ensure that our use of such gifts is focussed on mission and the service of others?
5. The famous description of love, most often read at weddings, is addressed to the divided church in Corinth and immediately follows this week's reading. Why not finish your study by reading together 1 Corinthians 13? How does it alter your understanding of everything you have considered about the previous chapter?

³ Quoted in Mark Tanner, *The Introvert Charismatic*, 2015, 111