

Discerning the Body

In **Luke 13:33-35**, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and knows that the time for his death is coming, but what is on his heart? He longs to draw all its people to him. In **Matthew 23:37**, he repeats this expression of his heartache, this time after he has entered Jerusalem and is teaching in the temple. Even just before he goes out with his disciples to Gethsemane, he pours out his heart to his Father for us all to be perfectly drawn together into a unit (see **John 17:16-23**).

Back in the Old Testament, when the exiles have returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and have been discouraged into stopping work, their lives have become frustratingly unfruitful. Everything they do seems to come to nothing and then the Lord tells them why: “You look for much, but behold, it comes to little; when you bring it home, I blow it away. Why?” declares the Lord of hosts, “Because of My house which lies desolate, while each of you runs to his own house.” (**Haggai 1:9**)

When Paul confronts the church in Corinth with their numerous problems, he lists their immaturity, their immorality, their mishandling of spiritual gifts and their selfishness, but he comes back several times to their divisions, their factions and their refusal to live as one body.

In **1 Corinthians 1:10-13**, he has heard of their quarrelling and division into groups based on personal loyalties and tells them “by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” to agree, not to have divisions, and to be “made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.” In the rest of **chapter 1** and into **chapter 2**, he writes about the amazing wisdom of God, how it has been revealed and how he passes on that wisdom to spiritually mature people.

But then in **chapter 3**, he says that he cannot treat them as mature people. Why? Because of their jealousy, strife and division! He says he cannot speak to them as spiritual people because they say that they belong to Paul, Apollos or Cephas (Peter). He tells them that, in reality, these men belong to them, not the other way round, and that they all belong to the Lord Jesus Christ, not to men or groups of men!

Then in **chapter 11**, he takes them to task about the divisions in their midst as they meet together. This is the context of the passage which is so often read when we break bread together. The Lord Jesus broke bread and shared the wine as a graphic demonstration of his death. Paul says that if they come together and take part in the feast, but in disunity, they are bringing judgment on themselves because they are not 'discerning' or 'judging' the Body of Christ rightly. This judgment takes the form, he says, of weakness, sickness and death.

What does the Lord make of our present situation? As far as unity is concerned, it is many times worse than Corinth. We don't just have divisions within congregations, we have congregations in rivalry and competition with each other, sometimes almost open warfare! As he looks at the believers in our communities, he says, "Here is my Body in this place". As we look at them, we say, "He is from this group, she goes to such-and-such church and they are part of that denomination." Just as he wept over Jerusalem and longed to draw all her children to himself, how he must weep over the Bride he loves and for whom he gave himself! While he longs to see the local Body working together, we effectively write each other off and say "I do not need them", just by refusing to function together as one.

How can we move forward? The most important thing is that we should start to see the situation as the Lord sees it. We have many different ideas about how the Church is meant to function. Perhaps we have read them in books, heard them from preachers or 'inherited' them from our family or fellowship. We need to humble ourselves and submit to what God the Holy Spirit shows us from the Scriptures – and go on learning! None of us has exclusive rights to truth but we all have access to the thoughts of God, because “we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God.”
(1 Corinthians 2:12)

We need to refuse the lie which says that things will never change. We have been specifically warned against it in **2 Peter 3:3-4**. We must not assume that, because divisions have been around for generations, they are inevitable. The Lord Jesus is coming back for a Bride who has made herself ready, who has neither the spots of immaturity nor the wrinkles of senility. This will mean change and often we do not really enjoy it because it is unsettling. But the alternative is disobedience to the Lord and slowing down his purposes. Which will we choose?

Practical steps. The first is the simplest, the most difficult and the most important:– we must learn to keep short accounts with God and man. In other words, we must not let any sin go unconfessed and unforgiven. If we miss out on the grace of God, we allow bitterness to get in and ruin many lives
(Hebrews 12:15).

Then we must put down any of our own vested interests. This is especially important and difficult for those in leadership but it also applies to each of us as we tend to feel a loyalty to the

group we are part of and would tend to try to preserve it. Of course each of us feels that the fellowship or group we are in is the best – if we didn't, we would probably leave it for a better one! May the Lord show us that, for corporate life as well as personal life, “whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it.” (**Matthew 16:25**) This is exactly what Paul writes about in **Philippians 2:1-11**, encouraging us to have the same attitude as the Lord Jesus, who put down his own personal interests to see his Father's purposes accomplished. Let us avoid the epitaph of **v.21!**

We need to recognise other members of the Body of Christ, on the 'grass roots' level as well as between leaders. Of course, it is easier for the members of different fellowships to share openly with each other if they know that their leaders are secure and trust each other, but we cannot just wait for the leaders, just as they cannot just wait for the members. We all need to learn to 'discern the Body' and start to function together. Friendships are a good start; we probably have those already with folk in different groups. Joint social activities may already happen; that's fine, helping to break down barriers. But we cannot just stop there – we must move on to learn to function together in the Church, to see the Body of Christ build itself up “according to the proper working of every part” (**Ephesians 4:16**).

Jesus prayed for us to be one.

Does God answer his prayers?

Will we find excuses to hide behind or reasons to obey?

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