

## One Body to Function

Jeremy has an old Morris Minor. He bought it before he took his driving test and drove it for a year or two after he passed. Then he decided to take it to pieces to do a complete repair and rebuild it. The gearbox is fixed and stands spotlessly clean in his bedroom. The engine has been repaired and is in a friend's workshop. The main chassis has been sandblasted and welded, ready for rust treatment and painting, and is another corner of the workshop. The back axle is in our old caravan with some of the bodywork. Some other bits are in our garage. He has still got all the parts (as far as we know!) but has he got a Morris Minor? What advice would we give him?

“Get all the parts working!” That seems like the answer, doesn't it? Well, he has certainly made some progress. I think the engine, gearbox and back axle work all right, anyway! Quite a bit of painting to do, though, plus some other repairs... Once he has got all the parts in top working order, will he have a Morris Minor again? Oh, just one little problem – they are not all together in one place!

“Get all the parts together!” Certainly a good idea; pretty obvious, really! It may not matter too much exactly where he collects them, though probably his bedroom is not the best place! I reckon that our friend's workshop might be just about ideal. It's nice and big and everything is out of the rain. He just needs to get all the parts working and together in one place, and he will have his car – or will he?

I don't need to take the picture any further, do I? We all know that just getting the individual parts working and bringing them into one place together won't get Jeremy his car back. He needs to fit them together properly, in right relationship with each other, with the proper lubrication and adjustment. Then he needs to make sure that the battery is charged and that there is petrol in the tank, oil in the sump, water in the radiator, hydraulic fluid in the braking system and air in the tyres. Once he has done all these (and a lot more besides), his car will be complete and ready to drive. Only then will he really have his old “Moggie” again, and not until then will it be able to do what it was designed for.

The Lord Jesus has a similar problem, although (unlike Jeremy) he did not cause it himself. He has all these parts scattered about in all sorts of unlikely places, many of which are ‘rusty’ or ‘jammed’ and don't work properly. Some have never functioned properly and it is difficult for anyone but the Designer to see how they could possibly fit in anywhere. Others

are working OK in themselves but have never seen the need to be joined to any other parts! This isn't car bodywork, it is Church Body work!

Every Part Working Properly. This is important but many Christians think it is impossible, confusing maturity with perfection. Parts of our learning to work properly as members of the Body of Christ are... Learning how to deal with our own sin and failure, how to step from repentance and forgiveness straight back into a real walk with God... Learning to hear and recognise the voice of God for ourselves, not just according to the latest book we have read... Learning to stand in our inheritance in the Lord Jesus Christ, appreciating more and more the power of his blood, his death, his burial, resurrection and glorious place at the Father's right hand... Learning to let him re-shape our lives... Learning to use the Name of Jesus in prayer and spiritual warfare... Learning to appreciate him in worship... Learning to use spiritual gifts...

Many of these overlap with each other and spill into our lives with other people, but they are about our own personal development as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ – essential to make sure that we work properly in the functioning Body!

In **Hebrews 5:11-14**, the contrast is drawn between infants (Greek 'nepios' – a child unable to talk) and 'the mature' (Greek 'teleios' – adult, mature, 'complete') and the expectation is clear that the readers should have grown up by now, and should be able to discern for themselves between good and evil, without having to be taken through the basics again.

In many of his letters, Paul emphasises the vital need for maturity, and especially in connection with the need for the Church to function properly. See **1 Corinthians 14:20, Ephesians 4:11-16, Colossians 1:28 & 4:12**. If we see that 'maturity' means 'completeness', we may begin to see that it involves both our individual growth and our being built together. It should also become clear that the growth of the whole body depends on the proper working of each part, and that our Father God is committed to bring us all to maturity. Using a different picture, he is determined for his Son to have a bride who has made herself ready, without spot of immaturity or wrinkle of senility. It is not vanity for us to think of becoming more mature, it is simply agreement with God's purpose for us. To deny this purpose is rebellion!

A Local Body? Much of **1 Corinthians** was written to reverse the division which had set in there. The Church in Corinth had begun to fragment into

factions and there was division in their meeting together. People had begun to pull away from their relationships with each other in Christ and form groups with special loyalties to leaders. Paul told them that their divisions proved their immaturity – he calls them ‘babes’ (‘nepios’ again), simply because they had set up personal loyalties. See 1 **Corinthians 3:1-9**. When they came together to take the bread and wine, these divisions were evident, and Paul said that their meeting was actually damaging rather than beneficial. They did not discern the Lord’s Body rightly and as a result some of them were sick and some had died. This is in **1 Corinthians 11:17-34**, part of which is the familiar passage which we often read as we break bread. **Chapter 12** is the well-known passage about the various parts of the body not being able to do without the other parts, in which Paul makes two parallel statements. In **verses 12 & 13** he says that all believers are in the one Body of Christ. Then, in **verse 27**, he says, “Now you are Christ’s body, and individually members of it.” Here are two aspects of the Body. Firstly, all Christians everywhere are members of the Body of Christ. Secondly, the Corinthian believers are the Body of Christ there in Corinth.

Paul does not only say this to the Corinthians. **Romans 15:5-7** is clear. **Galatians 3:26-28** is interesting. In the verses immediately before, Paul has been saying ‘we’, talking about what God has done for all believers in Christ. Then he starts to apply it to their own situations and says ‘you are all one in Christ Jesus’ – right there in their own church fellowships spread across Galatia. In **Ephesians 2:11-21**, he writes about the unity of all believers, and how we are all being built together into a temple in the Lord. Then, in **verse 22**, he turns it round to the local church and says, ‘you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit’ – the universal needs to become real locally. In **Philippians 1:27** and **2:2** he makes it clear that part of living in a manner worthy of the good news of Christ is to stand firm together with one spirit and one mind. Again, in **Colossians 3:15**, he says ‘you were called in one body’. With all this strong encouragement to be one body together locally, simple exhortations like ‘Live at peace with one another’ (**1 Thessalonians 5:13**) begin to take on more meaning.

We have seen Paul’s intense desire to see corporate maturity in the churches he served. His fellow workers shared it. In **Colossians 4:12**, Epaphras longs to see his home church stand mature and fulfilled in all the will of God. In **Philippians 2:19-21**, Timothy is concerned for the Lord’s interests, not his own. And what are the Lord’s interests? We may not realise that, as he prayed in **John 17**, Jesus cried out to his Father that

his followers should be made mature / complete ('teleios') into one, a unit (**verse 23**, literally).

This is beginning to look uncomfortably practical and visible; we cannot simply leave it with 'Christian things' in a separate compartment of our lives. It has enormous implications. If we live in a place, we are part of the Body of Christ in that place. Where does that leave 'commuting' to another fellowship meeting miles away, for whatever reason? What about divisions between some local Christians? They are much deeper than the ones that split the Body in Corinth!

On a practical level, we are not likely to see total local Christian unity overnight. However, if we long for full maturity, we need to see that we will only come anywhere near it as we grow together. The costs are higher than we may imagine, but so is the prize! God's purposes are delayed by our disobedience. We need to ponder that for a while!

Leaders have a particularly difficult task if they seek to move 'their' fellowships towards functioning as part of one body with others locally. Their own position, status and probably income are all at risk. Misunderstanding from other local leaders who may be suspicious or defensive; criticism from their own 'flock' as 'our church' seems to be under threat – so much easier to leave things as they are!

All of us have various vested interests. Many of us are more resistant to change than we think. We may find ourselves in favour of unity but keen to preserve the special features of 'our church'. At the very least, we need to start to function together with those in the fellowship where we are already. We can certainly grow on our own, up to a point, but that leaves us like many well maintained car parts, dotted about singly on the workshop floor, or perhaps in little separate heaps – certainly not as a working vehicle!

This is not just some 'special vision for these days'. It has always been God's purpose for those who are joined to the Lord Jesus Christ to be one with each other, both practically and spiritually. These New Testament passages should at least start to convince us that it is his will for us all to be together with the other believers in the area where we live. Our Father is committed to bringing us to maturity together. Whether we will trust him enough to begin doing something about it is up to us.

Dave Taylor     December 1998

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