

Saint Bartholomew, Apostle – Epistle

THE CHURCH AS ORGANISM (THE BODY OF CHRIST),
NOT ORGANIZATION (AN ACHIEVEMENT OF THE MEMBERS)

Saint Bartholomew, Apostle

1 Corinthians 12:27-31a

Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? 31 But strive for the greater gifts.

DIAGNOSIS: Dismembered from One Another and Christ

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Striving for Power (cf. v. 31); Self-Acclaimed Leaders (cf. v. 28)*

One of the dreams of the modern age has been the creation of a utopian (which means literally “no place”) society or organization in which the diversity of the membership (the parts) and the unity of the community (the whole) find a perfect coexistence. Indeed, such a “no place” or organization is often

how the Church of the Jesus Christ is envisioned—and not just for the church in Corinth back then, but for the church everywhere even now. How do we create this “no place,” this organization? That was vision of church that the Christians in Corinth sought to actualize. But that assumption was precisely their problem. For soon they began to ask, “Which member or part in the church possesses the Spirit of the whole (the Holy Spirit) so as to give leadership (order and structure) to the other members/parts?” In Corinth, the answer they gave to that question set the church into an uproar. Their congregation became a “no place” alright, not the “no place” of their dreams, but the “no place” of a nightmare. Diversity manifested itself as division, variety exhibited itself as competition, the discernment of gifts degenerated into a striving for power, and the unity of the whole translated into “my way” (1:10-13). True, in this uproar someone did/does seemingly come out on top—claiming to be more equal and more spiritual than others. In Corinth it was the “tongue speakers,” the pneumatic people, who claimed that role. They claimed both to possess the Spirit and to know the Spirit: They claimed power! Ironically, they became self-acclaimed leaders of the community only at the cost of community; they did it by dismemberment, by disposing of those in the body they regarded as “no body,” of “no value” (cf. vv. 22-23). Who are the self-acclaimed leaders in your community? Who claims to possess the Spirit? Is it the biggest givers, the most consistent attenders, the best singers, the most recent seekers, the longest stayers, the hardest workers, the most outgoing personalities?—to suggest but a few possibilities.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Self-Possessed: Trusting in Their Gifts, and Not the One to Whom They Belong.*

No one would deny for a moment the God-given giftedness of the self-appointed leaders in Corinth, least of all Paul, and neither would we today deny the many gifts that exist in our

congregations. The presence of certain gifts (or lack of them) is not in itself what is at issue here. The issue or problem here has to do with how the Corinthians then (and we today) regard these gifts and how, on the basis of them, they/we regard one another. In a word, the problem in Corinth was that people were placing their faith in their gifts. Faith in their gifts had replaced faith in Christ as the substance or basis of their spiritual identity, health and value. The so-called “higher” gifts (in this case, tongues) had now become the measure of spiritual progress, the mark of true spiritual achievement, and ultimately the envy of all would be spiritual people. The gifts, in other words, were given, so they presumed, for the sake of self-acclaim—as a sign of superiority over the lesser gifted, and were, thus, the gifts defined a spiritual hierarchy within the church: the higher gifts, like tongues, identified the more worthy, and the lesser gifts identified the less worthy, even the unworthy (cf. 12:22-26). By placing their faith in the measure of the gifts they possess, they became self-possessed and self-absorbed. They created not the egalitarian community rooted in Christ “where there is no [spiritual] distinction” (cf. Gal. 3:26-28), but a worldly place of division, envy, and scorn.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Dispirited: Dismembered from Christ*

By placing their faith in their gifts, the spiritual elitists in Corinth were really looking to themselves as the source of spiritual wholeness, as the defining unity of the community, and unwittingly cutting themselves off from Christ himself, the head of the church, and the Spirit of Christ, which is love. In other words, the body that was the community became dismembered from Christ. It became headless, Christless, and, hence, spiritually dead in spite of all its gifts. It was like taking an arm and putting it in the place of the head. True, although a body can

live without some members like the arm or the eye or the leg—though that is no reason for dispensing with them—the body cannot live without its head. Without the head it has no identity, it's just a mass of dead parts. The same is true of the church as the body of Christ. It cannot live without Christ. To be bereft of Christ is to lose love and to gain wrath and death. To be beheaded is to be dispirited, lifeless, and devoid of identity. When the members of Corinth (or churches today) strive for power in the community because of a misplaced faith in their gifts, the end result is a headless, mangled dead body, no matter how well organized they think they are.

PROGNOSIS: Embodied in Christ

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *The Body of Christ, Crucified—and Raised*

To this headless, mangled body (the church in Corinth) Paul brings the memory of another mangled body, Jesus Christ crucified: the wounded—once dead now living—head of the church. Indeed, the way of the cross is the “more excellent way”; it is the way of love as Paul expounds in Chapter 13. As bad as the situation was with the members of the Corinthian church—and it was bad—it certainly was no worse than what it was before they were baptized into Christ. Then, too, they were astray, dismembered, cut off from God, cut off from Christ, cut off from the body (community) of Christ (12:2). It is precisely through his crucifixion that Christ identifies with all cut-off people, and it is precisely through his resurrection that he creates a Body unlike any other. His Body is the utopian “no place,” par excellence. He came to meet us in death that we may rise with him as one Body, his new resurrected body, which is the church. Note: The church therefore, is not an organization, the achievement of the members, but an organism, the body of Christ himself, crucified (gathering the dead) and raised (bringing them to life in him). Paul's latter-day mission here in 1

Corinthians, therefore, is no different from his initial mission when he first encountered the gifted-but-dismembered Corinthians. Then, too, it took an apostle, a Sent One by God, to bring the memory of Christ crucified to them and, so now, it also takes an apostle to do the same. It made no difference initially if it was Apollos or Cephas or Paul, or any one else (like Bartholomew, whose saintly work we commemorate this day) who brought the Word of Christ, and it makes no difference now either. Therefore, for that reason Paul “decided to know nothing among [them] except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (2:2). They initially became the Body of Christ by virtue of their baptism (member-ment, connection) into Christ—and not because of the various gifts they possess—and it is on that same basis that they will be “re-membered” to that Body and remain in that Body.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Spirit-Possessed: Faith Binds Us to Christ Crucified

The Corinthians had always possessed many gifts; their giftedness was never an issue. The problem was that they (gifts and all) were dismembered from Christ and hence, became dead and useless to the Body. So how would they become re-membered to this Christ? The answer is by faith—or, to use Paul’s image here, by being possessed as a whole by the SPIRIT who works faith. The identity and life of the Christian community as the Body of Christ does not depend on their giftedness—and certainly not on their striving to possess what they thought of as the “higher gifts,” the more spiritually unusual gifts, like tongues. The identity and life of the Christian Community consists in faith alone, that is, in being possessed by the Spirit who unites us to Christ, making us part of his body, the body that was crucified and raised. Faith is the great equalizer in this community. Faith is what makes it an organism, one body, consisting as one reality in Christ. Faith [in Christ] is the one thing that all hold in common and faith [in Christ] is the

one thing that holds all together in common. Faith is the common work of the Spirit. The unity of the church is not located in some single superior gift but in the bond of the one faith that connects it to the one Body of Christ. By faith the church is an organism, many members enlivened by the one Spirit and united as the one Body of Christ.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Striving for Love; God Appointed Leaders

By being part of an organism—the Body of Christ, and not an organization—the members of the church think of themselves differently and relate to one another differently from any other kind of human corporate reality. In an organism the diversity of members is a source of joy that serves the whole. In an organism there is no longer a striving for power, but a striving for the common good, a striving for the love of one another. How foolish, Paul reasons, for one part of the Body to despise and reject another. That is like cutting off your nose to spite your face. In an organism, if one member suffers, the whole organism suffers; if one member rejoices all rejoice together (12:26). In the church there is no hierarchical appraisal of the one part over against another. There is only the appraisal of what serves the common good. And what serves the common good is that which promotes the unity of the Body of Christ—the world being saved in Christ. At different times, that could very well mean that different members, according to their specific gift, would be more or less active, depending on the need of the Body. In the Church, Paul explains, there are no self-appointed leaders. God does the appointing (v. 28). However, as Paul also makes clear, there are nevertheless leaders in the church. He even specifies them as he sees the need of the Corinthian Church in its present time and place: There are “first apostles, second, prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, etc.” But these are not positions of privilege or the identification of a hierarchical

structure or organization. This is a list of the gifted members that the Corinthian community values by virtue of its connection to the Body of Christ, and that exists in every community as they have need. In every community there will be apostles like Paul, Sent Ones to keep the community rooted in Christ its head, when that becomes especially needful. And in every community there will be prophets, teachers, miracle workers, healers, leaders of various types, and yes, probably even tongue speakers, when they are needed. If the Body needs a gift, a member with that gift will rise to meet the need for the sake of the Body. Oh, how wonderful it is when we as members of the Body of Christ, enlivened by the same Spirit (cf. 12:4) have opportunity to offer—in love (chapter 13)—our gifts for the sake of the Body as it has need! Strive to use your gifts for the sake of the Body! O how wonderful it is when we as members of the Body of Christ have opportunity to welcome and honor—love—those gifted members who rise to fulfill a need in the Body! Who are those gifted members in your community? Truly, there is truly “no place” like the Body of Christ.