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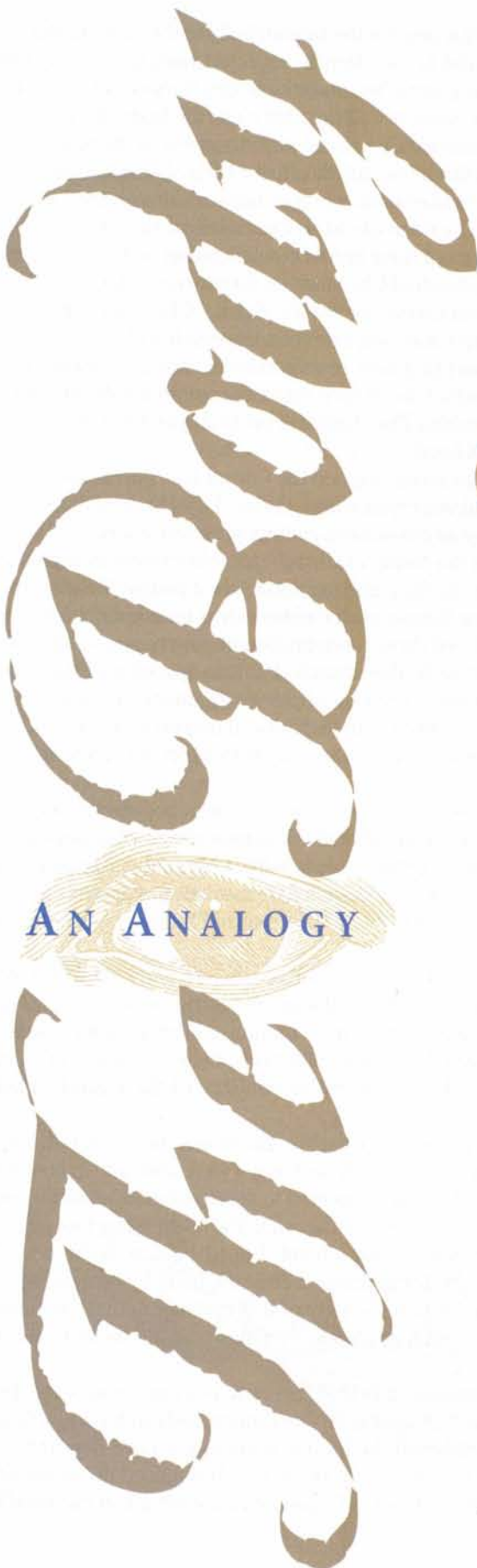
OUR UNDERSTANDING of 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 requires knowing what Paul meant when he used the word “body.” A term that appears 18 times (besides pronouns referring to it) in 16 verses clearly merits special attention. In only verses 21 and 26 is “body” not found.

Paul used the term “body” in two distinct but interrelated ways in 1 Corinthians 12. Once (v. 27) he called the church the “body of Christ.” “Body” refers to the physical, human organism 10 times (vv. 12,14-20,22-23). The expression likely refers to the “body of Christ” in the two other verses where it occurs (vv. 24,25). Both understandings would fit well there, and the interpretation remains the same in either case.

Paul began his discussion by pointing out that the human body is a single entity composed of many parts. No one member could take over the functions of the others. The body parts, though many and distinct, form a single body. The human body is more than a collection of organs and limbs. The use of the human body reinforces the reality that Christians exist in a state of mutuality and interdependence.

Lesson Reference:

EBS: 1 Corinthians 12:12-15,18-27



AN ANALOGY



**BOTH UNITY
AND DIVERSITY
CHARACTERIZE
CHRIST'S BODY.**

The apostle quickly likened the human body to the church. But instead of saying "so also is the church" as might have been expected after reflecting on the unity of the body, he wrote, "so also is Christ" (v. 12, KJV). Paul's later reference to the church as the body of Christ (v. 27) and his affirmation that Christians were baptized by the Spirit into the one body confirm that he was alluding to the body of Christ in verse 12.

"Body" is a particularly fitting term because the church is the earthly extension of the risen Christ as it does His work. The term further reminds believers of their intimate relationship with other disciples through each individual Christian's relationship with Christ. For Paul, believers are "in Christ" or "in the Spirit." Christians, through their union with Christ, have experienced His death and resurrection and have become part of a new resurrection community. Being the body of Christ means that the church experiences continually the presence of Christ in its midst. The church is the body of Christ because it draws its life from its Lord.

Division and disharmony plagued the Corinthian church. Believers had chosen sides and were quarreling (1 Cor. 1:10-17). Members saw the key to fellowship as possessing certain gifts without recognizing that the church was the "body of Christ." Members were comparing their gifts with others in the congregation to see who had the most desirable gifts. The Corinthians coveted gifts such as tongues and wisdom because they considered these more important. As a means to address and stop the bickering in the church, Paul compared the "body of Christ" (church) to the body as a physical organism. He compared God's creation of the church with its gifts and ministries to God's creation of the human body and the harmony with which its various parts functioned.

Comparing a group to the human body was popular in ancient times. It was used to refer to political relationships with each person in the city or state having a certain role to fulfill.¹ Menenius Agrippa told a fable in which various body parts allied themselves to starve the stomach, which they felt did little. Soon they realized their dependency on the belly.²

Both unity and diversity characterize Christ's body. Paul first examined the diversity or variety of gifts and ministries in the church (vv. 15-17). The Corinthians seem to have minimized the need for diversity as all believers coveted the same gifts. Some believers apparently felt their gifts were not significant in the ministry of the church. Paul thought otherwise.

He listed four representative parts of the human body—hand, foot, ear, and eye. He treated each body part as if it were alive and in conflict with the other parts. Then he "resorted to some *reductio ad absurdum* humor to portray the folly of such discord in the body."³ The foot might foolishly reason, "Since I'm not a hand, I don't belong to the body." Likewise the ear might discount its place in the body by comparing itself with an eye. Paul noted the folly of this arrangement. If all body parts were the same, such as an eye, then there would be no hearing nor sense of smell.

The obvious conclusion is that diversity is as necessary for the body of Christ to function as it is for the human body to function. God has placed each member in the human body as the Lord deems necessary for the body to function properly. God has placed the assorted gifts in the body of Christ so God's people can accomplish the Lord's ministry.

Having highlighted the necessity for diversity in the body, Paul reaffirmed that the many members still form one body. Each part of the human body needs the other parts to survive. He again engaged the body parts in an imaginary dialogue. No one body part could claim that no other body parts were needed. All body parts are necessary.

Paul declared that the weaker organs are the more necessary ones. The weaker organs are apparently the inner organs such as heart, liver, and kidneys. He also classified some organs as less honorable (most likely the sexual organs). These are accorded more abundant honor because they are covered with clothing. In like manner, the "weaker" organs (members) of the church are also necessary. Christians have no cause for boasting if they have more obvious and visible gifts.

Paul drew the conclusion that the unity of the body of Christ requires that stronger members care for weaker members. A better understanding is that when the body of Christ functions properly, the stronger care for the weaker. That is the ideal toward which the church should strive.

Paul's final analogy reminded the Corinthians of their common life in the body of Christ. He used the scenario of one body part hurting or suffering. When one part hurts, the entire body is affected. Most of us realize that when any body part is hurting, it affects the rest of the body. Being a baseball fan, I am reminded of times when managers take pitchers out after a slight injury. Otherwise, the pitcher would compensate for the pain and injure himself more seriously. When one member of the body of Christ suffers, all members suffer. This is not some hypothetical case. Because of the unity of the body of Christ, one member's pain hurts all the members, although they may not realize it. Believers share a common life in Christ.

The human body is God's marvelous creation of harmony in many parts and functions that keep us alive. Likewise, the body of Christ is God's marvelous creation of harmony in many parts and functions that keep it healthy and ministering in the world.

¹F. F. Bruce, "First and Second Corinthians," *New Century Bible* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, Ltd., 1971), 120.

²*Ibid.*, 121.

³J. W. MacGorman, "Glossolalic Error and Its Correction: 1 Corinthians 12-14," *Review and Expositor*, Summer, 1983:393.

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