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1 Corinthians 12:12–27—One Body, Many Parts

Paul uses the image of “one body with many parts” in two of his letters. In Romans he simply states the analogy: “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another” (Rom. 12:4–5).

In 1 Corinthians he develops the image further:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary,

the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

(1 Cor. 12:12–27)

Notably, the Roman historian Livy (59 BCE–17 CE) reports an incident in which a spokesperson for the Senate told a fable of uncooperative body parts to persuade plebeians into accepting the leadership of the patricians.

The Senate decided, therefore, to send as their spokesperson Menenius Agrippa, an eloquent man, and acceptable to the plebs as being himself of plebeian origin. He was admitted into the camp, and it is reported that he simply told them the following fable in primitive and uncouth fashion:

“In the days when all the parts of the human body were not as now, agreeing together, but each member took its own course and spoke its own speech, the other members, indignant at seeing that everything acquired by their care and labor and

ministry went to the belly, whilst it, undisturbed in the middle of them all, did nothing but enjoy the pleasures provided for it, entered into a conspiracy; the hands were not to bring food to the mouth, the mouth was not to accept it when offered, the teeth were not to masticate it. Whilst, in their resentment, they were anxious to coerce the belly by starving it, the members themselves wasted away, and the whole body was reduced to the last stage of exhaustion. Then it became evident that the belly rendered no idle service, and the nourishment it received was no greater than that which it bestowed by returning to all parts of the body this blood by which we live and are strong, equally distributed into the veins, after being matured by the digestion of the food.”

By using this comparison, and showing how the internal disaffection amongst the parts of the body resembled the animosity of the plebeians against the patricians, he succeeded in winning over his audience.¹

1. Livy, *History of Rome*, trans. Canon Roberts (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1905), book 2.32.