

We're Here to Pump You Up

1 Corinthians 12:27

Andy Wallace
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Today we are going to talk about bodybuilding. “‘I’m Hans.’ and ‘I’m Franz.’ ‘And we are here to pump you up.’” This great lead into one of my favorite Saturday Night Live skits from the late 1980’s is a spoof on bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger. Actors Dana Carvey and Kevin Nealon are dressed in padded muscle suits under gray sweats complete with weight belts and awful Austrian accents. The reoccurring sketch was titled “Pumping Up” and, despite the name, for most of each episode Hans and Franz criticize others for being weak and out of shape. In between, they would pose and show off their muscles in ridiculous body builder poses.

Paul had a different kind of body building in mind. Paul writes this letter to encourage the body of Christ in Corinth...the church.

It was just last week that Pastor Wayne reminded us that the church became the bride of Christ, and together we are called Beulah because we have been married to the one who loves us most. And he gave us the image of a young couple who might have been filled with hope, who had never experienced disappointment or quarreling. What if we extend that to the church? This new church being formed around the Apostles as they preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Did the early churches begin that way?

Picture it: Corinth; A.D. 52. The city was “at the meeting of the ways.” Perfectly situated on the north-south highway between two thriving ports, the city had been rebuilt by Julius Cesar just about one hundred years earlier. Paul arrives and sets up as a tent maker as a way to support himself while he began preaching and teaching, converting, and sewing the seeds for a church in that place. We can imagine that those people gathered together in happiness with singular purpose. That they were filled with hope and had not experienced disappointment or quarreling among them. And together, as a church they lived happily ever after? No. The church is not a fairy tale.

The church in Corinth began to experience quarreling and disappointment. They began to divide into factions; 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ.' They began to disagree about spiritual gifts, among other issues. Much like our friends Hans and Franz whose mantra was that they were here to pump you up, there was a whole lot of tearing down going on. Paul's first letter to the church is a response to these questions and a word of encouragement.

Teachers constantly try to figure out how to guide students in learning a concept. Many times making the idea personal is the best way to get it done. How much more personal does it get than to compare the church to our bodies? In fact, Paul uses this image of the body throughout this chapter. So here it is; your body. And it is easy to see how things should work. Your body has many parts: head, torso, limbs, organs, cells. No matter how many parts you can name, you're still one body. Talk about a visual aid! When we slow ourselves down enough to think about the body, we gain an appreciation for the miracle of how all of our pieces and parts work together. We are made up of many parts; and though our parts are many, we form one body. Every part of the body is important because each of us is a member of the church.

"We were all baptized with one Spirit into one body." The Apostles were baptized with the Gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The rush of a mighty wind, tongues of fire, speaking in other languages. They were then blessed with gifts of the Spirit. We share in the Gift of the Spirit and then the gifts of the Spirit. It makes us part of the body of Christ. We receive it when we accept Christ. The Holy Spirit comes to us when we make a conscious decision to accept Christ. In our tradition, we mark that occasion with a ceremony in the church called Confirmation. We stand before the congregation and answer questions of faith. Some have given statements of faith to the whole church or to a smaller group representing the whole church. The Holy Spirit enters our lives for salvation and sanctification. When I think back to when I accepted Jesus, there was a distinct lack of the dramatic; no rushing wind, no tongues of fire. At my public profession of faith I mostly remember being very nervous and nearly falling over onto my friend Kevin when we knelt. While accepting Christ is a very holy and serious moment, it is sometimes fun for me to think about the Holy Spirit moving about doing the job of the Spirit. Every time someone accepts Christ - 'Bam. You are part of the body. Ooo. There's another. Whoosh. Another one in the body.' We may actually not feel anything but we are baptized by the one Spirit into the one body. We belong to the body of Christ.

Then Paul tells us something marvelous. It does not matter who we are and how we got here. We were all baptized by the same Spirit into one body. It doesn't matter if we are Jew or Greek, slave or free. We belong to Jesus Christ. We are all now equal. No worldly classifications that seek to divide us apply because we are all members of the body. And we function together in perfect harmony. Right?

Paul recognizes the challenge of being in community together in two parts. First is the feeling of being second-rate. "Now the body is not made up of only one part but of many." Every member of the body has a specific job to do. The foot is pretty low on the body, it doesn't get any lower and he knows it. "I'm only a foot. I can't do the things the hand way up there can do. The Sunday School teacher never says, 'raise your foot if you know the answer.' And just last week we sang *Precious Lord, Take my Hand*. I don't belong." Now we overhear the ear, "Right around the corner is the eye. She gets to see such wondrous things. I can't see those beauties: the colors of the sunrise, gulls soaring over a tranquil sea, snow hanging on the edges of pine trees. I don't belong." This kind of thinking and reasoning prevents us from being a functioning body.

The next image we are given is meant to bring home the point of belonging and it really can be seen as quite comical at the same time. Maybe Paul did just have a sense of humor. "If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?" Well now, that's just a ridiculous image. We almost have to think about it as a cartoon. It's not possible to have a body with just an eye or just an ear. Look around you today and think of the people who are part of this body. Now let us hear again, "God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them just as he wanted them to be." God has put together this body just the way God intended. We are many parts designed to function as one body. There is a place for you. We all belong.

Figuring out how we fit in is part of our journey. We are made up of a diverse mix of individuals. We received the gift of the Holy Spirit and by that same spirit we have been given different gifts for the common good. So there is more than receiving the Holy Spirit. We are also given gifts of the Spirit. Earlier in 1 Corinthians and elsewhere, Paul lists some of these gifts. The message of wisdom, the message of knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, leadership, serving, mercy, teaching, encouraging. Mary Fairchild who spent time as a missionary, church office administrator, assistant to a church ministerial staff, and author describes Spiritual gifts as given, "to prepare God's people for service and for building up the body of Christ." We use the gifts of the Spirit to help strengthen the faith of those in the body.

To me it seemed as if there was a period of time in church life when identifying your Spiritual gifts seemed to be a singular focus. I remember sitting in a workshop as an early 20-something and being all worked up about discovering my Spiritual gift. I was getting really uptight. I didn't know what this miraculous gift from the Spirit was and had never given it any thought. But there I was with an hour left to go in the workshop and no identified gift. Talk about pressure. Maybe I should have read a book; but which one:

Discovering Your Spiritual Gifts

Mastering Your Spiritual Gifts

Find and Use Your Spiritual Gifts

Know Your Ministry: Special Gifts for Every Believer

Spiritual Fruit, Gifts, Works, and Callings

Your Gifts: For Teens. The Easy-to-Use, Self-Guided Spiritual Gifts Survey

I for one am glad that Paul never says to sit down in a focus group and identify your gifts. But the Spirit with which we were all baptized gives us gifts nonetheless. The Spirit moves and works in and around us and we are called to respond. We are called to use these gifts for the common good. Perhaps rather than focusing so much on identifying and categorizing our gifts we might be more open to God's calling through the Spirit. Being receptive to that call is about listening and responding. Sometimes we feel an inner motivation, a drive, a call to do some work in the church for the common good; to build up the body. Other times the moving of the Spirit comes from others in the form of an invitation. And still other times we are presented with opportunities as different situations arise.

Let's look at just how some of the many gifts of the Spirit might be used.

At Fellowship after worship you talk with someone who mentions that they are facing a challenge. Sitting down together, you let them know that you understand how they are feeling and invite them to call you if they need to talk. That's using the gift of empathy.

You hear the prayer concerns lifted up in worship and follow up with an invitation to dinner to someone who you know is experiencing loneliness. That's using the gift of hospitality.

Steve is a former colleague of mine who was just beginning his own faith journey. It was such a joy to witness his excitement as his faith grew in strength and maturity. His enthusiasm was infectious. One day he was on a flight reading a book about Christian faith and the person next to him noticed the title and chapter topics. They struck up a conversation about Jesus. She had many questions and was seeking meaning in her life. Their conversation came to a natural end as the plane began its descent. When they rolled to a stop at the terminal, Steve recalled that he suddenly felt that there needed to be something more to the interaction. But as soon as that seatbelt light goes out, we all know everyone is up and anxious to get going. So Steve turned to the woman and handed her the book saying, "Please enjoy reading this book. It is about Jesus and his love for you." Now he always reads a book about Christian faith when he flies. That's using the gift of evangelism.

When we give of ourselves for the common good, to build up the faith of those in the body, we use the gifts of the Spirit.

Having this scripture passage put on my heart has been a gift in itself. I have been keenly aware of people in this congregation using their Spiritual gifts. Answering the call to serve as a worship assistant, to be a head usher, to serve on a committee, to prepare the sanctuary for worship every week and decorate it so beautifully for Advent and Christmas all are ways people have used their gifts of helping and serving.

Watching children and adults visit the sick, giving a hug, join in singing Christmas carols to those in a nursing home, finding a quiet place in the sanctuary or around the church to sit and talk about the challenges in life are all ways you have shown mercy and ministering.

Some ways we use our Spiritual gifts involve work. It takes planning, a commitment of time, phone calls, texts, emails, meetings. And sometimes it takes no time at all. When we encourage one another, we are using a Spiritual gift. Encouragement builds up the body. At our January staff meeting, Wayne read Acts 4:36 about a man the disciples called Barnabas, which means son of encouragement. He asked us to think about who in the church had encouraged each of us that week. What a powerful moment as we shared the words that had been spoken. Those words of encouragement help to build the body.

Twenty years ago a friend of mine and a friend of this church gave me an invitation. At the time I was living in Hope Valley and driving for 45 minutes all the way to Cumberland to attend the church where I grew up and where my entire family was. I was enjoying playing in the handbell choir, singing in the choir, going to church dinners. I was comfortable and had no idea what the Spirit had in store for me. “This church in Westerly is looking for a youth bell director. You should apply.” Who me? I can’t do that. I don’t know enough. I don’t belong. Remember that workshop on Spiritual gifts that had caused me so much stress? Well, I had eventually ‘identified’ my gift and this was not it. The box I had checked off was teaching. That’s what I was supposed to do. That’s where the worksheet said I was supposed to focus. I had identified my gift. No more stress. Done. Period. End of story. So sometimes the Spirit has surprises for us. Sometimes we get that inner call to do some work of the church to build the body. We don’t know all of the gifts the Spirit has given to us and trying to identify them on a list is really not the important part. Desiring to strengthen the faith of others, to work for the common good; these ought to be our focus.

It is in verse 21 that we see a change in who Paul is addressing. He moves from those who feel second-rate to those who feel as if they don’t need the rest of the body. We move into dealing with the feeling of pride. Maybe he is getting to the heart of the issue with the church at Corinth. In addition to dividing into factions, members of the church were also arguing over whose Spiritual gifts were more worthy. There was a focus on the gift of speaking in tongues. Paul had to remind the church that there are different kinds of gifts. We are each called to use these gifts for the common good. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable are treated with special honor.” There is really no ambiguity here. We all need each other. Every member of the body is necessary. Each gift is needed. Our call is to encourage the gifts and those who use them. Like the church in Corinth, it is tempting for us to judge one gift as more important than others particularly those gifts that are more visible, or in this case the gifts that are louder.

Some gifts lend themselves to being out front. These gifts are no more or less important than the behind the scenes gifts. Paul keeps us focused on the great visual aid of our bodies. If we were just eyes, what could we do? Can the head really do anything without the foot? We then apply this to the body of Christ. Let’s just consider all of the behind the scenes to this worship service. Someone had to unlock the doors, turn on the heat and lights, give of their resources so the oil and electric bills could be paid, straighten the pew racks, run

the sound system. Someone had to consider the themes in the service and select a prelude and postlude that reflects the message in music. Someone had to type, format, print, and fold the bulletins. Someone greeted you when you arrived, vacuumed and polished the floors, prepared lessons to teach your children in Sunday school. Someone came to rehearsal to practice the music and anthem. Someone lit the candles, prepared food for fellowship, volunteered to assist with worship. Someone may have given you a hug, or maybe invited you to sit with them. Someone prayed.

We could go on naming the gifts that have been given and used to build this church body. If we begin to see the multitude of gifts we begin to appreciate the parts that go into building this body. God has put us together and arranged our parts, each and every one of us, just as God wanted us to be.

“Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it.”

The Holy Spirit put you in the body. The fact is that you are part of the body even if you think you don't belong. Friends, be open to the call of the Spirit. Each part of the body is valued and necessary. Let us celebrate the diversity of gifts we have been given and encourage one another. Let us all work for the common good. Let us all work to strengthen the faith of those in the body.