

ONE BODY, MANY PARTS: A READING OF 1 CORINTHIANS 12:12–27 *

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on a reading of 1 Corinthians 12:12–27 that, whilst acknowledging more familiar interpretations, attempts to ask further questions of the text, looking at issues such as diversity, marginalization, exclusion and justice. Influenced by Black and Womanist theology, and also drawing upon her own experiences of “church” and her work, the author applies the exploration of this familiar text both within and beyond the church context.

Keywords: Black, Corinthians, diversity, justice, re-reading, theology.

I come to this work, not as a biblical scholar,¹ but as a Black, British-born woman of African-Caribbean heritage. I am influenced partly by Black and Womanist theology,² partly by my own natural curiosity and questioning about God, Christianity and the Church. The passage I chose to address in my paper was the famous text on the body and many parts from 1 Corinthians.

* This essay was written, initially, for a Black theology conference on Bible held at the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, in Birmingham, in July 2006. The title of the conference was “Reading and Re-reading the Bible.”

1. The author has an MPhil in Education from the University of Birmingham. Her scholarly training has been in the area of Christian Religious Education, looking at the teaching and learning about the Christian faith through the interpretative frameworks provided by Black theology.

2. Although I am somewhat influenced by these perspectives, this is not an explicitly Black or Womanist theology reading of the text.

This Corinthians passage is one which speaks, on the surface at least, of the coexistence of unity and diversity. Dunn states that the Church in Corinth “was a very mixed group, with several differing views and practices which put considerable strains on their common life.”³ Therefore, Paul attempts to encourage a sense of cooperation and unity amongst a group of people that were struggling with their differences. The analogy of the Church as a body appears useful since it allows the idea of the coming together of different roles and gifts in a common goal. The passage not only relates to the various beliefs and practices of the people but also to the spiritual gifts they possessed. **But what, if anything, can this passage offer in present times? Is there a way of reading that has something useful to say in our current contexts? What can this passage say in my context of the United Kingdom where there is a “backlash” to and a retreating from the commonly held commitments to multiculturalism? Can this text help in addressing the questions of difference and sameness in my context?**

This idea of unity is a theme that can be retained in the application of the passage today. We can interpret it on a global scale, unifying Christians of whatever denomination across the world; we can bring it down to a local congregation with people of varied backgrounds and abilities coming together in worship and in the running of a church.

On the surface, it **creates a comforting ideal where our differences (whatever they may be) do not matter when we come together in Christ, since we all have a part to play. This sense of focusing on unity has its value and validity up to a point, but there is often a sense in which, in our apparent quest to emphasize unity in Christ, we are actually trying our utmost to avoid exploring or even acknowledging any idea of the differences that exist between us.**

In the particular context from which I come, growing up in a “historic-mainline”⁴ church that was attended by a number of Black families, **concerns around “race,” culture and class were underlying issues in the life of the church community.** These are subjects that often make people uncomfortable and defensive and the Corinthians passage could, in that type of environment, be seen as a convenient means to avoid any discussion of them in the sense of **“Why do we need to talk about Black and White? That doesn’t matter, we are all Christians here.”** From my own observations, even as a child, I could see that it was more complicated than that; the implications of those issues were played out in the everyday interactions of the community, even if they were not directly discussed.

3. James D. G. Dunn, *1 Corinthians* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 9.

4. I acknowledge the problematic nature of this terminology.

The fact remains that, whatever ordinary people or “the Church” as an institution may claim about unity in Christ and differences not being important, the reality is another matter. We need only look at the history of the Church and its encounters with those perceived as “the other” to see the truth of the matter. Furthermore, there are other questions to be asked of this supposed “sameness.” When we talk about “all being the same,” who acts as the “model” to which we all conform? If we refuse to recognize our differences, are we truly presenting our full and real selves to God? If we believe we are each made in the image of God, where is the shame in expressing fully who we are, since those differences are included in who God created us to be? Are congregations full of people who still believe they do not measure up to the “standard” and so deny important aspects of themselves in order to fit in? This question is a particularly potent one for Black people who know what it means to be told that we do not measure up to the standards of others.

The challenge is to take a passage that can, when read in a particular way, encourage unity by “glossing over” any recognition of our diversity and reading it as something that, perhaps, poses different questions. If we want to examine ideas of being of One Body without diminishing acknowledgment of our diversity, what might we come up with and what might be demanded of us?

Both Black and Womanist theologies insist we ask questions of the biblical text, mainly connected with concerns about liberation. If we took the Corinthians text at face value, we could argue it is sufficient to say that its useful meaning lies in the fact that any one of us has intrinsic value and a role to play within the Body of Christ. This reflects the ideas of declaring our value as part of God’s creation referred to within the aforementioned theologies, which endeavour to counteract the wider society’s attempts to diminish and even deny the humanity and worth of Black people. Singleton states, on the subject of Black theology:

It seeks to empower black people to determine what is in their best interests socially, economically, politically, and religiously, and to destroy everything in the society that is inimical to those interests—namely, ideologies of white supremacy.⁵

But is this interpretation of the text sufficient; is this truly the overriding message? Is there more for us to take from this reading of the passage?

5. H. H. Singleton, III, *Black Theology and Ideology: Deideological Dimensions in the Theology of James H. Cone* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 41.

A Practical Application of the Passage

I begin this exploration of the Corinthians text by first looking at an application of it outside of the church context. Here, it was employed as part of a Religious Education⁶ resource. The application of the text to this new environment is a useful exercise in that, by doing this, one is encouraged to think about what the Bible (and Christianity) can offer to a context that is not necessarily Christian or even religious. What are the ideas within it with which people can connect or identify? What are the critical questions people can ask of it? What difference can or does it make? The Religious Education framework offers opportunities to explore these questions.

Religious education provokes challenging questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, beliefs about God, the self and the nature of reality, issues of right and wrong and what it means to be human.⁷

This application of the Corinthians text is based on a lesson plan from the *Living out Faith*⁸ website. The perspective and intentions of the lesson are illustrated in the information provided to teachers at the start of the lesson plan.⁹

This lesson:

- complements QCA non-statutory unit 6a “Worship and community” and 7b “What does justice mean to Christians?”
- supports RE’s contribution to citizenship
- provides opportunity for cultural, moral and social development.

Learning Objectives

Pupils will:

- explore how food illustrates the diversity and interconnectedness of people of the world

6. Religious Education here refers to the non-confessional teaching about religions that takes place in British schools.

7. Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (2004), “Religious Education: The Non-statutory National Framework.” PDF file available at http://www.qca.org.uk/libraryAssets/media/9817_re_national_framework_04.pdf, 9 (accessed September 4, 2007).

8. This is a web-based resource that I have developed, which incorporates Black cultures, histories and experiences into teaching about Christianity. Available at www.livingoutfaith.org.uk. Adapted, in part, from A. G. Reddie, *Growing into Hope, Volumes 1 and 2* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1998).

9. Available at <http://www.livingoutfaith.org.uk/index.php?op=modload&name=knowledge&file=index&viewCat=45> (accessed September 4, 2007).

- explore the diversity of Christianity
- explore issues of social justice through fair trade
- look at how fair trade can reflect biblical teaching.

In this example, the passage was used to explore issues of diversity and interconnectedness and to think about the implications of these concerns, emphasized through ideas of interdependence and justice.¹⁰ The latter two themes were drawn from the reading of vv. 21, 25 and 26, which talk about the parts of the body needing each other, of the concern they should have for one another and the sharing in each other's joys and sorrows.

If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.¹¹

In this context, to discern the true value of the text, it is imperative that the application of these words explicitly moves beyond the confines of “the church” or even of “believers,” and incorporates the whole of humanity. Verse 26 speaks not only of our reliance on and connection to one another, but of the fact that, through the unjust treatment of some of its members, humanity as a whole is diminished. This makes the reality of unity much more complex and demanding; we are not simply required to fulfil our *own* roles within the Body of Christ, but to be concerned with and responsible for the welfare of *all* its members.

The lesson plan, entitled *Variety of Gifts*,¹² uses a food game as a way of entering into an exploration of the various themes of the Corinthians passage. The young people are encouraged to choose their favourite foods from a selection stemming from various cultures (including those represented in the classroom) and to think about from where in the world they might originate. The choices they make form the basis of a brief discussion about cultures and identities. The game provides a means of illustrating how food often provides a link to our cultural heritage. We have meals that reflect our cultural and ethnic backgrounds in terms of the ingredients used, the way they are cooked, the celebrations at which they are presented, and the recipes that are handed down across generations. Food can often act as a reflection of who we are and how

10. This idea was, to some extent, present in the original material but was developed further in the lesson plan.

11. From the New International Version—UK, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Available at Biblegateway.com at: <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20corinthians%2012:12-27&version=64> (accessed September 4, 2007).

12. Available at the Living out Faith website as above.

we imagine ourselves as people. Conversely, many Black young people also enjoy foods that stem from cultures and countries that are not directly part of their own cultural heritage, showing their connections to and interactions with people of other cultures and ethnicities and from other parts of the world.

Moving on from the game and building on the theme of being linked to others through the food we enjoy, the lesson then focuses on the Corinthians text and the ideas of interdependence and justice. In the food game the participants are encouraged to see how they are often reliant on people they never see for the provision of their food; the labour of others makes it possible for them to have the choices they enjoy. It is pointed out that many who carry out this work are not adequately paid and may not even be able to afford to enjoy the food they actually grow, being forced to sell it abroad. It is here that issues of justice come to the fore. If the analogy of the Body is taken to encompass the whole of humanity, then the plight of these poorly paid workers should be reflected in the words of verses 25 and 26:

... so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.

If one part suffers, every part suffers with it;¹³

The influence of Black theology again takes the reading a step further. Cone claims:

God-talk is not Christian-talk unless it is *directly* related to the liberation of the oppressed. Any other talk is at best an intellectual hobby, and at worst blasphemy.¹⁴

If we take this theological challenge seriously when linked to the demands of the text, it does not appear adequate, simply, to be passively concerned for those who are being deprived of a decent wage and standard of living. Rather, there is a requirement to seek out what can practically be put into action to challenge the inequity of the system and to endeavour to alleviate the conditions in which oppressed peoples exist. Black theology focuses on hope for the living, not on some ideal of heaven after death. Cone states that, from the standpoint he takes, “eschatology comes to mean joining the world and making it what it ought to be.”¹⁵

13. New International Version—UK, International Bible Society, as above.

14. J. H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 60, original emphasis.

15. J. H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 126.

Within this lesson, young people are encouraged to engage with the lives of the individuals affected by these issues¹⁶ and to see how this feat can be attempted. Here, they see how action taken to redress the balance (through the support of fair trading) is less about charity or Christian patronage and more about justice and an active response to the points made in the text. “The Body” as a whole should only rejoice when all, not just a privileged selection of its parts, benefit from fair wages and a decent standard of living. This text has a sharp resonance when one reflects upon the wholesale exploitation of African peoples on that continent.

Within the lesson plan there is also another issue that is only touched upon, but which could potentially be developed further. This issue stems more from specific concerns around diversity within the church. This is a point that it is important to make within a Religious Education setting in order to counteract the preconceptions that can often exist about the essential identity of what constitutes a Christian or where Christians live and how are they to be recognized. It is often the case in UK Religious Education that one encounters teaching and learning material that implies that Christianity is primarily a White, European religion.

In order to counter such perceptions, I was concerned with illustrating that diversity of many kinds exists within religions and that, although Christians may share certain core beliefs, there are different ways of understanding and expressing belief and also different ways of worshipping.

This perspective is reflected in the analogy that is used in the Corinthians passage. The influence of Black theology within the work meant it was also essential to emphasize that Christianity is not a White, Western religion and to mention specifically the presence of Black Christians within the church, including their representation across the breadth of denominations, and the consequences that racism has had at certain moments in their history.¹⁷

These points offer students the opportunity to ask questions about and critique Christianity by looking at the dichotomy between the claims of the Christian faith and what actually occurs as faith is lived out in everyday lives. History shows much about how the members of the “Body of Christ” have or have not co-existed and co-operated and which groups of people have been, and often still are, deemed of lesser value or are excluded.

16. Through the Fairtrade website, available at <http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/> (accessed June 12, 2006).

17. Referring to the establishment of Black denominations in the USA and the experience of Black Christians in British churches in the 1950s and 1960s.

The incorporation of the Corinthians passage into this lesson plan shows one attempt to engage with the text in a different manner. Here, the text is employed to promote engagement with diversity rather than downplaying the issue. Ideas about unity become not only concerned with showing sympathy and solidarity with fellow human beings but also asking questions about injustice and inequality and how society can at least attempt to counteract these concerns. In effect, this approach to the teaching and learning about the Christian faith is about making plain the need to acknowledge, address and challenge our perceptions and the reality of difference, rather than seeking to avoid or even ignore it.

This lesson plan shows one perspective on the text and its use in a particular context outside the Church (this is not to say that these same issues could not be discussed within a church context). Here, I applied the more “familiar” themes of the text and explored them within the framework of a Religious Education lesson. I could have pursued a more detailed investigation of cultural and ethnic diversity within the Church or perhaps made more of the links between “race” and poverty, but given the limited scope of the context, chose to explore a particular perspective in order to achieve a specific outcome.¹⁸ It is clear that the text has more to offer and that there are further questions to be asked of it.

Returning to the Passage

As stated earlier, the Corinthians passage offers itself to be used to promote the idea of unity within the church, locally or globally. It employs the idea of the various parts of the body each having an individual role but working together as one unit. This is intended to echo the desired relationship between followers of Christ and their coming together in a common purpose. On the surface, this appears a reasonable intention, but it is only when looking more carefully at the passage and reading with my particular perspective that I start to perceive other meanings within the text, that at certain points appear to me to be contradictory.

I must reiterate that I am not a biblical scholar, and, therefore, cannot claim to know the exact history, intention and context of this extract. I am re-reading from my current perspective, with the theological influences I have already declared. I am, in effect, adopting a “reader-response” approach in my interpretation of the text.

18. Limited by the requirements of the subject area, time constraints and the age range for which the lesson was devised.

Looking at vv. 12–18, this at first appears to be saying that all people, no matter what their position or background, are part of the Body of Christ, just as the parts of the body form one whole. I find the section beginning with verse 15 particularly useful.

If the foot should say, Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body, it would not for that reason cease to be a part of the body.

This section appears to support the value of diversity and bringing our true selves to God, which I touched upon in my opening reflections. These verses argue against those ideas that assert we have to conform to certain categories of acceptability or become duplications of someone else in order to feel that we belong. It provides encouragement to those who find themselves on the margins of society and may feel they are not deserving of God's love or worthy of being taken seriously. It places value on the God-given gifts, strengths and qualities of each individual. Again, there are echoes here of the need, emphasized within Black and Womanist theologies, for the oppressed to reclaim and celebrate their value as children of God despite the attempts of the wider society to devalue them. On the surface, the message of this passage appears commendable, but a particular re-reading leads me to ask further questions. Earlier in the passage, at v. 13, it is stated:

For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.¹⁹

The text, in the subsequent verses, proceeds to describe (as I have just discussed) how the various parts of the body cannot exclude themselves from the body in preference to other parts, whilst also pointing out how the body could not function if it consisted of just one part. This leads into v. 18, which states:

But in fact God has arranged the parts of the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.²⁰

Looking again at this v. 18 alongside v. 13 causes me to question my reading once again. Could it be said that, as well as encouraging unity, this passage could be used to promote an acceptance of the status quo in regards to social and economic marginalization and injustice?

Rather than challenging a system that dictates where people are placed, and perpetuates the oppression of some, this reading suggests that the system is indeed God sanctioned, and that God has placed all people in conditions where

19. From New International Version—UK, International Bible Society, as above.

20. From New International Version—UK, International Bible Society, as above.

God meant them to be. There is no suggestion that part of the coming together in Christ should entail questioning of or overturning unjust social or political practices. It suggests, rather, that these practices and divisions can be overlooked as inconsequential when we become united in belief in Christ, since that is the way God made the world.²¹

This reading into the text would perhaps not be problematic for someone enjoying high standing or power within society or the church but seems to encourage those at the bottom of the pile to graciously, piously and passively accept their condition as willed by God. It is not necessary to go back very far in history to discover how texts of a similar ilk have been used to justify the oppression of Black communities, for example. Spiritualized and pietistic approaches to dealing with injustice are ones that have been offered to many Black people from the hands and lips of so-called benevolent White hegemony.

Verses 21 to 24 I find intriguing and somewhat puzzling in places. Taking v. 21, it states:

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!

This starts off well, appearing to encourage a sense of inclusiveness and recognition of mutuality. But v. 22 has an almost condescending ring to it:

On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour.

The passage here seems to be implying that those represented by the hands and feet are perceived as the weaker parts compared to the eye and the head, but weaker in what manner? It is unlikely to be a reference to *physical* strength if we consider the role that the hands and feet typically play within the body. Is it, then, a reference to intellectual, spiritual or even moral strength? So whilst supposedly attempting to encourage unity and cooperation, there already appear to be value judgments being made about the roles that are carried out by members of the Body of Christ. Who is represented by these “weaker parts” of the body and why are they really “indispensable”?

This particular reading strategy could, with a liberational perspective, be taken as an attempt to reflect God's particular interest in those on the margins,

21. There is a similar argument made regarding Galatians 3:28 by D. K. Williams, “The Bible and Models of Liberation in the African American Experience,” in R. C. Bailey, ed., *Yet With a Steady Beat: Contemporary US Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 33–59 (44).

but is it more the case that their presence is a way of making the “stronger” parts feel superior? Is this more a reflection of the way in which the work of the “hands” and “feet” is crucial to the smooth running of “the body” but what they have to offer is valued less highly than the “superior” abilities of the “head” and “eye”? Who are the “feet” and “hands” within the church or humanity as a whole? Who are those whose physical labour and practical input is accepted but whose ideas, experiences and opinions are not valued or taken seriously? What does this offer the women who ensure the smooth running of their churches, provide hospitality, fulfil caring roles, lead particular ministries but who are constantly denied the opportunity to take overall leadership of the churches they attend?²²

What does this say to those churches where, whether through class, colour or gender, people are divided into those encouraged and expected to preach, lead groups and sit on committees and those limited to filling the pews and making the tea, neither encouraged nor provided with the tools to take on leadership roles within their own churches because they are deemed unsuitable or “unqualified”? How does this speak to a worldwide church in which those in the West still exhibit patriarchal and patronising attitudes towards their sister churches in the developing world? What of the global powers reaping benefits from the cheap labour and rich resources of the poorest countries?

Even more perplexing for me is the second part of v. 23 leading into v. 24. It begins:

And the parts that are unrepresentable are treated with special modesty.²³

Who are the members of the body of Christ that fit into the category of “unrepresentable” that are “treated with special modesty”? I am mystified as to why the author takes the analogy this far in his original context, much less to try and decipher to whom he might have been referring. Perhaps there are biblical scholars who could throw more light on the subject. Nevertheless, within a contemporary perspective, I think there is still something that can be drawn from the text.

The verse suggests to me a sense of covering up or keeping something quiet, most obviously linked to issues of gender and sexuality. In terms of gender, it seems to reflect the ways in which women have been covered up and silenced,

22. See Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001). See also Elaine Foster, “Women and the Inverted Pyramid of the Black Churches in Britain,” in G. Saghal and N. Yuval-Davis, eds, *Refusing Holy Order: Women and Fundamentalism in Britain* (London: Virago, 1992).

23. From New International Version—UK, International Bible Society, as above.

both literally and symbolically throughout the history of the church. We can look to the scarcity of female voices within the biblical text, the absence of women in the process of deciding the canon, right through to the limits placed on, and the roles assigned to, women in the church today. There are many other examples that could be cited. Furthermore, when looking, for example, at standards of moral behaviour, women often seem to be judged and indeed punished more harshly than their male counterparts, portrayed as conniving temptresses against which men have no power to resist.

The issues that the church has with the question of sexuality of any kind are well documented. Whereas some progress has been made in encouraging churches to (sometimes grudgingly) engage with issues around race and gender,²⁴ discussion of sexuality remains for many a taboo; a “no go area,” beyond the pale, and perceived as a subject on which the biblical text makes very clear judgments. Those who are marginalized because of their sexuality may see their experience reflected in this verse, perhaps feeling that The Body requires their silence and “modesty” before they can be accepted and valued.

Even disregarding the link to gender or sexuality, there are suggestions here again of value judgments being made, of people being rejected or marginalized, of people not being encouraged to recognize their own worth. Who are the people who do not conform to our ideas of what a “Christian” should be? Those who we find embarrassing or who ask too many difficult and awkward questions? Who are the people we find it difficult to deal with and that we would prefer to ignore or exclude? What are the areas of our lives which we do not want to acknowledge or of which we are ashamed? Finally, there are the questions around the whole use of the analogy of the body and its parts, in and of itself. What, if anything, do these verses offer to those affected by disability or infirmity of any kind?

The Corinthians text is, for me, problematic and full of contradiction. On first reading, it appears, on the surface, to instil a sense of unity and interdependence, a celebration of the diversity of the Body of Christ. This seems to offer an exciting blueprint to which we should aspire. As Martin states in his examination of the text, this diversity does not

... destroy the oneness of the church; rather it transforms a drab entity into a living organism which pulsates with life ...²⁵

24. This is not to say that these do not remain areas of contention within the church, but to acknowledge them as more widely recognised and “acceptable” issues.

25. R. P. Martin, *Understanding the New Testament* (London: Scripture Union, 1968), 33.

I find, however, reading deeper into the text actually also unearths instances of exclusion, marginalization and promotion of hierarchy. With this perspective, one could say that the passage actually seems to reflect the history of the church quite accurately. While on one hand attempting to describe an ideal, the text possibly becomes a means by which the sad reality can be uncovered. One could even cynically state that the text is not at all problematic since, if we are honest, the Church and society as a whole function on such notions of hierarchy and it is unrealistic to expect this to be otherwise. After all, a body can still function without a “foot,” but not without a “head.” My point would be to ask who decides who should be the head?

One could argue that a text that appears to merely reinforce the hierarchical structures on which church and society is built should be discarded entirely, as it has no use within a liberational reading of the Bible. Others might claim that my reading is biased and inaccurate or that I have “read too much” into it and that the “accepted” interpretation of it is sufficient. I would reject both stances. For the latter, I would ask whether it is possible to read the biblical text without bias, or should I say more accurately, without a particular perspective, since we each bring our own experience and context to our interpretation of any text. Further, since we can only speculate about the intentions of the author, who is to say what is or is not a definitive interpretation?

As for the former opinion, I feel that there is merit in first entering into and grappling with those texts which appear to counter the liberation standpoint, rather than simply discarding them. Perhaps it is from struggling with those difficult places that we might unearth the important questions we need to ask about our lives, our faith, our churches and humanity as a whole. From the perspective I have taken, in this case at least, it is not always about looking for the answers or ideals presented within the biblical text; on occasion it is perhaps more valuable to simply explore and wrestle with the difficult questions that the text provokes in us.

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