

One Body Many Parts: A Biblical Theological Examination, and A Redemptive Historical Outlook

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Thailand has a colour problem! If you follow international news in the last couple of years, you might be familiar with the social and political situation in my country. It has been a turbulent time. Do you know that many people in my country wear particular colour clothing based on their political stance? We have red shirts, yellow shirts, navy blue shirts, baby blue shirts, white shirts, and green shirts. Very often these shirts represent viewpoints that seem irreconcilable. The country has been in one of its most tumultuous times. The colour problem is so bad that I have a section in my closet dedicated to shirts with colours I can no longer wear outside my home. Thailand is so divided that at various times over the past year or so there were feelings that civil war or a military coup could be imminent.

I know the colour problem in my country may seem trivial when compared to many situations of conflict that many of you are facing in your contexts. Nevertheless, the question for all of us is how should we equip the church to handle such a problem of strife in our culture?

This week we have centred our discussions on relationships and communities and their effects on how we teach and train church leaders at our schools. I thought it might be appropriate to speak on a familiar topic of “one body many parts.” But I want to do things a little differently this morning. Instead of working from a particular biblical text, I want to situate a well-known passage within the larger biblical theological context. I want to suggest that a particular illocution exists at the canonical level. Specifically, I believe that the “one body many parts” of the visible church is not an end to itself, but a starting point of and a means toward the “one body many parts” of the redeemed humanity. And a theological interpretation of 1 Cor 12 in the context of the whole Scripture can help us see a fuller picture of the “one body many parts.” Through this, I hope that what we would gain is a better understanding of the issue of unity and diversity, which would in turn shed light on our responsibilities as Church and our duties as theological educators toward our cultures.

Christians tend to talk about unity and diversity of the church under the discussion of spiritual gifts. You well know that there are four main passages on this topic (i.e. Rom 12, 1 Cor 12, Eph 4 and 1 Pet 4). Each of these passages gives its own reason why every Christian should use his or her unique and diverse set of gifts that God has given them. This morning we shall only look at 1 Cor 12. In this passage Paul equally emphasizes both the unity and diversity of the Church.

1 Cor 12 is often used in the pulpit to emphasize the need for unity in the church. The sermon often goes like this: There is a problem of the church not able to get along. Thus there needs to be unity.

And the solution to unity, one often suggests, is to put away their differences for the sakes of harmony and to dissolve their diverse many-ness for the sakes of oneness. That is to say, unity, for many, is often appropriated by uniformity. However, if we look closely at the text, especially verses 15-20, we would find that ecclesial unified oneness presupposes the great value of diverse many-ness within the body. As the saying goes, unity does not itself mean uniformity. For true unity is the unity of diverse multiplicity, not unity of sameness. I know I am preaching to the choir. All of us sitting here believe in a unity that values diversity. But if you are anything like me, you will also know that the acting out of what we say we believe about the unity of diverse multiplicity is not at all simple and straight forward.

Anyhow, we see in this passage a twin emphasis on unity and diversity. 1 Cor 12 is a classic text that addresses the complex relationship between “the one and the many” in the church. The reflection on the ecclesial oneness and many-ness often recalls the corresponding oneness and many-ness of the Godhead. Of course at this point we must listen to Dr. Blocher’s caution this week not to make too much out of this analogy. Nevertheless, even he admits that “looking for an analogy of God’s relational Tri-Unity in the church is warranted.”

Now I know that I have been asked to do a Bible reading, and not to read a paper. However, would you allow me to switch to academic mode for just two minutes, because I think this is important? And here, I want to look at Miroslav Volf with an eye of discernment and another of charity. Whether one agrees with his conclusions or not, one must admit that he, perhaps better than any other Protestant, has tried to make sense of the actual connection between the one and the many of the Church and those of the Trinity. To be fair to him, Volf is cautious to qualify this correspondence between the Trinity and the Church. And in doing so, he sets limits and clarifies the analogy. For instance, he points out that the relationship between the *one* universal church and her *many* members is of a totally different kind with respect to the relationship between the *one* divine nature and *three* divine persons of the Trinity. Thus the correspondence between the church and the Trinity as such is not that which is significant. A more significant analogy lies in the relationships between the divine persons and those between the ecclesial many. Furthermore, Volf adds that the correspondence between Trinity and church is not purely the formal construct of relationship, but this relationship must have a material content in that “[t]he relations between the many in the church must reflect the mutual love of the divine persons.” Now please put on record that a Presbyterian has shown charity to a Baptist!

So, many agree then that the source of the Church’s “one body many parts” is the relationship between the divine persons of the Trinity. But what about its destiny? Is there a purpose to the “one body many parts” of the church beyond its own? To answer, we must situate our text in the redemptive historical context of creation, fall, redemption and consummation.

Our drama begins with God creating humanity after himself. The humankind, both men and women, was made after the divine image to reflect God in various ways. In a limited sense, humanity is an analogous reflection of the Tri-Unity of the Trinity. It is a reflection that must include both particularity and relationality as its twin make up, and we must consider them so in a proper biblical tension. We could thus say that “the one body many parts” of humanity originated from the unity of diverse multiplicity of the Triune God. As such, humanity’s unity of diverse multiplicity is “very good” because we are a copy of the Trinity. This unity of diverse multiplicity is also very necessary for us to reflect the unity of diverse multiplicity of the triune God.

Then came the fall. The effect of sin is extensive and total, leaving its path of destruction on the *imago dei*. Because of sin, the good and necessary diversity of humanity deteriorates into disputes, dissensions and discords. The “one body” became divided and is no longer functioning as one. The eye does say to the hand, “I don’t need you.” This of course leads to all kinds of relational problems, such as alienation, strife, oppression, abuse, selfishness, at the personal, societal and national levels.

But how do we solve the problem of disunity caused by the fall? Is disunity overcome by reducing diversity, i.e. by making the many think the same, believe the same and do the same things, in

effect, by making the whole body an eye or an ear? My brothers and sisters from the former Soviet Union can answer this better than I can. Scripture doesn't condone making everyone the same. But it offers reconciliation as the solution of estrangement. To say it differently, the salvation that God ushers in includes the redemption of "the one body many parts" of humanity; salvation involves the return of the true unity in diverse multiplicity. If sin devastates the good and necessary diversity of humanity, and thus disrupts the harmony of "the one body many parts", then salvation through the Lord Jesus must at least include in the redemption of all creation a return to this harmony.

This is where "the one body many parts" of the church fits in. The church of Jesus Christ is both the beginning and the co-agency of that return to harmony. God has given his church the privilege and responsibilities in his plan of redemption. Our clearest task is, of course, the proclamation of the gospel. But as we well know, the scope of the gospel is not limited to the spiritual task of soul saving. Salvation must be holistic & comprehensive in the redemption of all things from the effects of sin. As such, the church is the inauguration and the chosen agent of this redemption. On the one hand, we are the first fruit community of the New Creation. But we are not just that, for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is also a co-agent of redemption of the created order. This holistic and comprehensive redemptive process cannot be less than the verbal proclamation of the gospel, but it must also be more. It must also include the battle against extreme poverty and the care for orphans and widows of our days. The gospel must embrace proper advocacy and liberation of the oppressed. It must fight against all forms of injustice and corruption (and bribery!). The redemption through the Lord Jesus Christ must address all aspects of creation affected by the fall. And with this in mind, we must also conclude that "the one body many parts" of the church cannot be an end to itself, but it is a trajectory that consummates in the redemption of humanity's one body many parts.

So what does all this mean for the "colour problem" in Thailand and in many of your contexts? How should we equip the church through our students to handle such a problem of strife in our cultures? At least this ... the church must learn to be an agent of reconciliation that advocates true unity, i.e. the unity of diverse multiplicity. This task must begin within our walls, of course. How the church addresses disunity within her walls impacts her witness to the outside world. If we have no means of moving closer to a reconciliation of diverse multiplicity in our own churches, how then can we expect the world to believe that the gospel has the power to overcome their lack of unity of diverse multiplicity? For example, how do we move toward the unity of diverse theological multiplicity? Dogmatism fosters discords and dissensions. Relativism, on the other hand, leads to ecclesial anarchy. Then we have the 1 Cor 12 approach, which models for us the unity of diverse multiplicity. Such unity values the diverse parts and tries to understand other theological positions through the lens of discernment and charity; discernment because not all theological views are equally valid and must be tested and guided by Scripture; charity because it is that which allows us to see the good and value in the others. Also in the unity of diverse multiplicity, various theological parts must work together to build up (or shall I say "BIG UP") one another toward one common goal. It is a unity that does not ignore our diverse multiplicity, but in fact actively uses our diversity toward the common goal "soli Deo Gloria". And as such, the strengths of one could augment the weakness of another.

We must also be agents of reconciliation to our society. The church cannot ignore the problem of strife in our world, something that often happens when the church find herself as a very small minority as in the case of Thailand. For the work of reconciliation is an important part of "seeking the welfare of the city." I dare not venture to suggest a specific solution to your "colour problem", but only to say that as in the case of the church, relativism leads to social and political anarchy. Dogmatism fosters discords and dissensions. However, the unity of multiplicity values diversity, tries to understand each other through the lens of discernment and charity, and promotes the various parts of the society to work together to build up one another and the whole. And as such, the strengths of one could augment the weakness of another.

An understanding of "the one body many parts" in a proper redemptive historical context gives us a clearer picture of our role as church. We must act to fulfil our role as co-agents of redemption, who

constantly work to redeem the harmony of “the one body many parts” of humanity. The unity in our churches must not itself be the end goal, but a trajectory that moves toward the eschatological harmony. For our Lord Jesus himself promises, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.”