



"The best way to destroy an enemy is to make him a friend."
—Booker T. Washington

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Autoimmunity in the Body of Christ

Some of the least-understood diseases within human pathology are autoimmune diseases. By way of definition, *autoimmunity* is the failure of an organism to recognize its own components as part of itself, causing the immune system to turn against and attack the organism's own cells and tissues. Some of the better-known autoimmune diseases are Celiac disease, Type I diabetes, lupus, multiple sclerosis, and rheumatoid arthritis. In them, critical parts of the body are attacked after being misidentified as foreign. Depending on the exact autoimmune disease, this can include the small intestine (Celiac disease); the insulin-producing cells of the pancreas (Type I diabetes); the heart, lungs, blood vessels, liver, and kidneys (lupus); the central nervous system (lupus, multiple sclerosis); and the skin and joints (lupus, rheumatoid arthritis).

Many autoimmune conditions are quite debilitating, severely limiting the activities and overall lifestyle of those suffering from them. So interconnected is the human body that, when the immune system attacks an organ or system, it drastically affects the whole. What Paul says of the spiritual body is equally true of the physical body: "If one member suffers, all the parts share the suffering" ([1 Corinthians 12:26](#), *Amplified Bible*).

As dreadful as autoimmunity is within a physical body, spiritual autoimmunity far surpasses it in the power to debilitate and destroy. Spiritual autoimmunity—misidentifying other parts of the Body of Christ as enemies, or at least being highly suspicious of them—is affecting various quarters of God's church, causing the whole Body to function with tumult and inefficiency.

This autoimmunity often manifests itself in boastful or bombastic comparisons between one's own minister or group and another minister or group. We witness it in insinuations that another member of the Body is somehow less important or less spiritual or less converted if he sends his tithes to a different address or is on a different mailing list. Sadly, it is seen when leaders forbid members from having fellowship with another organization's members for no greater crime than the other organization has a different—*foreign!*—approach or administration.

Paul makes extensive use of the body metaphor in his first letter to Corinth, a badly divided congregation. He writes, "For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ" ([1 Corinthians 12:12](#)). He continues by showing the respective positions of the various members:

If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? . . . But now [God](#) has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. . . . And 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." (verses 15, 18, 21)

To illustrate, we could continue Paul's line of questioning in verse 15: If the shoulder says to the ankle, "You are not of the Body," is the ankle therefore not of the Body? If the circulatory system says to the endocrine system, "You are [Laodicean](#)," is it truly Laodicean? If the stomach says to anyone who will listen, "I am Philadelphian," is it really Philadelphian? If the back tells the rest of the Body, "I am the only one God is using," does this make it true? Do the Body's parts have any authority to make such pronouncements? Paul answers in [Romans 12:3-6](#):

For I say . . . to everyone who is among you, *not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think*, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of [faith](#). For as we have many members in one body, but *all the members do not have the same function*, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, *let us use them*. . . .

In the human body, the immune system is a vital part of the body's defenses. In the spiritual Body, defenses are likewise needed, as we can see in the many warnings about false prophets ([Matthew 7:15](#); [24:11](#); [Mark 13:22](#); [I John 4:1](#)), false apostles ([II Corinthians 11:13](#)), [false teachers](#) ([II Peter 2:1](#)), and false brethren ([II Corinthians 11:26](#); [Galatians 2:4](#)). Truly, there are enemies—foreign invaders—who cause trouble for the church of God. The problem is *improper* discernment and judgment—a hallmark of this era ([Revelation 3:17](#))—combined with a lack of [forbearance](#) that manifests itself in identifying enemies at every turn.

Autoimmunity in the human body often kicks in when there are no other infectious diseases to combat. A hair-trigger immune system in need of an enemy will find one—even if it is a vital organ. Likewise, members of Christ's Body who are blind to their spiritual state tend to presume the moral high ground—rejecting all evidence to the contrary—and from that position it is easy to identify all manner of "enemies" whose [offense](#) may be little more than disagreeing with them.

Paul outlines the responsibilities of the church leadership in his letter to the Ephesians. Notice where the focus is: "And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, *for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ*" ([Ephesians 4:11-13](#)).

Here, apostles, evangelists, pastors, etc. are not given for the sake of *adding* to the Body! [John 6:44](#) makes it clear that only God can do that. These positions, Paul writes, are given specifically for the sake of *taking care of* those God places in the Body. God adds them to the Body as He sees fit, tasking the leadership with *caring for the Body*: binding the wounds, cleaning the sores, anointing the bruises, setting the bones (see [Isaiah 1:4-6](#)).

How much effort has been put into healing the wounds, bruises, and putrefying sores? Rather, many in God's church seem to have concluded that we just need to keep dragging the wounded Body forward—a hideous sight, as one part of the Body assaults another—yet still bent on making a witness to [the world](#)!

With human autoimmunity, there are no good solutions. Science has not been able to solve why this happens, so its solutions are generally to suppress the immune system and/or treat the symptoms. But with the spiritual Body, the cure is simple, though the application may be exceedingly difficult: Focus more on the Head and less on the offending parts. Let the Head judge who is a part of His Body and who is not. Let Him decide who is best suited for each responsibility. Let Him determine what the Body should be doing at present. Beyond this, *beseech* the Head for the vision to see things as He does—including our own spiritual state. When the Body in spiritual health is working in concert—and not attacking itself—*then* [Jesus Christ](#) is glorified.

- David C. Grabbe

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[Forbearance](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

We are much too sensitive and litigious, greatly lacking in forbearance, tolerance and patience. A major part of God's character is forbearance, patiently putting up with over 700 years of covenant breaking by our ancestors, patiently refraining from giving them what they deserved. God put up with the foibles of Abraham, Samson, David, Job, and many others, allowing them space to repent and build character. We need to develop the godly trait of forbearance, having the capacity to have mercy on others while we wait for them to change. Forbearance when applied to our brethren leads to unity; lack of forbearance leads to scattering.

From the Archives: Featured Article

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

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