

1 Corinthians 12:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?

Analysis

If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?—Paul pushes the absurdity to comic extremes: imagine a body composed entirely of one gigantic eyeball—it could see but not hear, smell, taste, or touch. Such a creature would be grotesquely deformed, severely handicapped. The rhetorical question (pou, "where?") emphasizes the loss: the other senses would simply not exist.

Application: if the whole church were prophets, who would administer? If all were evangelists, who would shepherd? If everyone taught, who would listen and learn? Uniformity produces dysfunction. The Corinthians' desire for everyone to possess the prestigious gift (tongues) would create a monstrous church-body. God's wisdom in diverse distribution ensures the body has eyes to see, ears to hear, hands to work, feet to go—all functions necessary for kingdom mission. The church needs contemplatives and activists, teachers and doers, visionaries and administrators.

Historical Context

Paul's *reductio ad absurdum* echoes Greco-Roman rhetoric's use of exaggeration to expose faulty reasoning. His hearers, familiar with body-politic analogies, would immediately grasp the lunacy of a single-organ society.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. What happens in churches where one gift-type dominates (all teaching, all evangelism, all worship)?
2. How can you help your church celebrate gift-diversity rather than pursuing gift-uniformity?
3. What 'senses' (gift-types) might be missing or underutilized in your church body?

Interlinear Text

εἰ	ὅλον	τὸ	σῶμα	ὀφθαλμός	ποῦ	ἡ	ἀκοή	εἰ
If	the whole	G3588	body	were an eye	where	G3588	were hearing	If
G1487	G3650		G4983	G3788	G4226		G189	G1487
ὅλον	ἀκοή	ποῦ	ἡ	ὀσφρησις				
the whole	were hearing	where	G3588	were the smelling				
G3650	G189	G4226		G3750				

Additional Cross-References

1 Corinthians 12:21 (Parallel theme): And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.