

The light of Epiphany: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

by [Debbie Blue](#) in the [January 12, 2010](#) issue

The ancient church fathers struggled with the physical implications of the incarnation—the mother’s womb, the birth and afterbirth. God gets a human body, orthodoxy has always proclaimed: a human body rife with bacteria, hormones and phlegm. Tertullian insists that God became fully human, though he recounts the details with some distaste. “Beginning with the birth itself,” he says, “the uncleanness of the generative elements within the womb, the filthy concretion of fluid and blood—the growth of the flesh for nine months long out of that very mire . . . the womb.”

Unlike Tertullian, I like the womb. I don’t feel offended by the physicality of Christ’s birth. But in 1 Corinthians, when Paul says to the church, “Now you are the body of Christ,” it’s enough to take your breath away and stop your heart. The church? What about all that patriarchal muck out of which it was born? What about the “filthy concretions” of empire and power seeking? What about the church’s obscene fascination with celebrity, its endless squabbling?

God reveals Godself most fully, the Christian church professes, not as a rational system or a set of ethics, not as an unchanging principal or some magisterial deity, but as a vulnerable human being. How could God so recklessly inhabit such a contingent, fragile, volatile, potentially destructive thing: a human body with teeth and tempers and some seemingly useless flaps of skin?

We live in a culture that gravitates toward the virtual. In almost every endeavor (business management, public relations, etc.) we tend to believe that success or salvation has to do with the mind or the spirit transcending its physical support system. The vision is easier to pull off without the interference of flesh and blood. The immaterial idea is far more noble, far less ambiguous than fleshly, erring human beings—so how strange that the Gospels insist that Christ is God incarnate in the vulnerable and the weak and the messy.

Paul is surprisingly graphic here for a guy who seems uncomfortable with a woman’s hair being exposed. He writes about our “unpresentable” parts—alluding, I presume,

to breasts, genitals, the upper thigh. We need all the parts he says. I like the imagery. Some of us may be nose hairs, enzymes, part of the digestive tract. I think of my own congregation and of how we need all the parts—extroverts, introverts, cooks and musicians. There's a lot about the church I like.

The scandal of the thing becomes apparent to me, however, when I think of the parts of the church out there that I find truly unacceptable. Wouldn't we be better off without some of the testosterone, for example? Sure, we need ego and muscles, but don't we need some size limits on these parts?

I'm happy to think of God incarnate lying on his mother's lap, but I'm scandalized by many of the church's "body parts": inquisitors, conquistadors, the masculinity movement. The church is not a pretty place.

When I read about evangelical sergeants in the United States military who "distribute Christian apocalyptic videos to the troops in Iraq" and "impose mandatory briefings on the correlation of the war to the book of Revelation," I'd like to say, "Cut off that hand." I belong to Apollos, I belong to Barth, I belong to a liberal intelligent peace-loving church; I do not belong to this.

But Paul says God chose what is foolish in the world, what is weak. God chose what is low and despised. Paul says God chose all of us: sick and beautiful and broken people, Mother Teresa, Gandhi, desert mystics, evangelical sergeants, church ladies, bishops, and even me. He seems to think it is important that we love each other, that we somehow allow love to trump division. Dostoevsky's Father Zossima says, "Love in reality is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams." He wasn't kidding. As Marcus Pound says in an interview with the *Other Journal*, "Christianity doesn't present us with the great panacea, healing all fractures and wounds. On the contrary—it invites us to identify through the incarnation with the greatest trauma of all: that God was man."

Paul says God chose us. Of course it's not because of how good and clean and superior we are. Of course this is no reason to boast—it's reason to be floored by the love of God. Paul is outrageously confident that we will manifest that love—as if he has experienced for himself a love of God that knows no boundaries.

Epiphany is about the church shining its light in the world. It's a funny sort of light . . . a neon sign with half its letters burnt out, some of them blinking: "hurch . . . urch . . . hurch . . . urch." It is broken and bent and dim, but still giving off its light with its

witness to the world's need for the grace of God.