

The Body of Faith, Hope and Love

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The Revd Prof Deborah Mackay

Ecclesiasticus 44: 1–10, 13–14 I Corinthians 12: 12–27

And now faith, hope and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

I am an epigeneticist. I work alongside doctors in translational research to better diagnose and treat a group of rare disorders – epigenetic disorders – which arise not from changes in the DNA but changes in how it is used. What is epigenetics?

You have one body with trillions of cells. Every cell has the same DNA; every cell is doing different things with it. Eyeball cells use specific eyeball genes, and look like eyeball; skin cells use skin genes and therefore look like skin. That's what gives rise to you as a human: your one genetic make-up, used in trillions of different epigenetic ways.

While each cell must play its unique role in the life of the body, each cell can only persist in the life of the body which is more than the sum of its parts. All the cells that form you must act upon and be acted upon by their surroundings, so that you can persist over time. You as a body are an emergent of the shared work of your cells.

This emergent nature is hard to see in our own bodies. Most of the cells you can see in yourself are 'terminally differentiated' (that is, they use a consistent set of their genes; they are committed to maintain things exactly how they are). Consider the skin of your hand – thousands of thousands of cells that basically look and work in similar ways. And you're rather relying on them to do that – to maintain a fairly constant number, size and shape – to maintain the appearance and function of you as a whole.

It's easier to see your emergent, epigenetic nature if you imagine an early embryo. Balance it on your fingertip: 1/10mm, eight cells. They all look alike, they all have the same DNA. But each cell's DNA is organised slightly differently. These tiny epigenetic differences commit each cell to make slightly different products; these different products cause each cell to look and function slightly differently; their different working gives rise to new epigenetic changes in their DNA; these epigenetic changes commit the cells to more and more diversity of form and function, as, over time, these seemingly homogeneous cells divide and differentiate into the living body that is you.

As multicellular creatures we must be epigenetic: not only because every cell in our bodies has the same DNA and does different things with it now, but because we require the capacity to do different things over time. The epigenetic status of a cell in the present represents its form in the future. A cell whose epigenotype differs from its current form is a cell committed to change what it looks like and what it's doing. On the level of the whole body, this gives rise to development.

Our psalm says it a different way – and to paraphrase a little... you knit me together in my mother's womb. In thy book were all my members written, when as yet there were none of them. My complexity as an epigenetic body overwhelms me as a person. Indeed, it was – and remains – a significant impulsion in my journey as a Christian. How great is the sum of thy counsels. If I tell them, they are more in number than the sand, and at the end, I am still in your presence.

Now, hold on to that epigenetics, because we'll come back to it later; but for now we turn to our epistle, where Paul offers the Corinthians a metaphor of themselves as members of a body – the body of Christ. (The church was smaller then, of course, it was embryonic.) In the hellenistic culture in which Paul was writing, the human body was often co-opted as a metaphor for the body politic. In this body, different members were assigned by Nature to different positions, and cooperated harmoniously for the good of the whole. The body metaphor was used to reinforce the givenness of existing hierarchies, to shut down any concept that the body politic, or anyone in it, could ever be different from exactly how they are. Who would imagine, let alone desire, a toenail becoming an eye or a heart?

Paul evokes this body metaphor in order to subvert it. In Corinthians, he insists that every part of body be treated with equal respect. Elsewhere (in Galatians 3), he represents baptism as a kind of de-differentiation. In baptism, the seemingly ineradicable marks of social hierarchy – of Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female – are erased, and this reveals our radical pluripotency, our human potential to grow and develop in new ways. Ecclesiasticus points out how the Lord apportioned to different people great glory.... those who ruled ... those who gave counsel ... those who composed musical tunes, or put verses in writing... We could add to the list the soldier, the poet, the neuroimmunologist who have stood in this stall this term, reflecting on the same three words of scripture, from such different standpoints, to such different effects – a vivid illustration of how our Christian lives call us to share the word of God as we live it out in our own ways.

So, Paul's subversion of the hellenistic body metaphor is still relevant for us now. But our own culture has prevalent images of bodies. Let's see if we can do a little subversive biological theology of our own.

I don't know what images are evoked for you by the words, 'the body of Christ'. But it may well be anthropomorphic – indeed, the body of Jesus – maybe adult male, maybe hale and pale –with undertones of wellness, perfection, changelessness. If we imagine the church, the body of Christ, as vitruvian, then as members of it we may be terminally differentiated (like adult skin cells) – a Christian lineage committed to maintain our form, function and environment exactly like it is now.

But what if we evoke an epigenetic metaphor of Christ's body? What are the consequences of thinking this way? First, the cells and the body are mutually dependent. While every member of this body has one life in one spirit, each one can – and must – play its unique role in the life of the whole which is more than sum of parts. Second, the body of Christ cannot be fixed or final in form; not so long as it is living. Its capacity for change is not only inherent, but essential.

And this is where I want you to recall that embryo – each cell changing its epigenetic form, committing to change what it looks like and what it's doing – which, on the level of the whole body, gives rise to development.

If you are a living member of this living body of Christ, you may have an image of yourself – of the world – and indeed, of our church body – that is different from how it is now. This is your hope. Your hope may impel you to commit yourself to live and act now in a way that fits a different future. This is your faith. Your actions, born of hope and faith, are actions of love. If the body of Christ is a living body it is a body of faith, hope and love.

There may come a time when our love and care for one another are so complete, that not one member of this body will need to hope for a different future nor commit to act for its coming. There may come a time when faith and hope can rest in a perfect unity of love. But, as an epigeneticist, I think such a vision is beyond a horizon of our experience. For now, we can only live if faith, hope and love abide, these three; if we hope for, commit to, and live toward a unity that is more than the sum of its parts.