



What a Break! *A Modern Parable* (1969)

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Don't misunderstand me; I'm not the first fellow ever to break a leg. Broken legs are at least as old as skiing—and likely a whole lot older. But when my short career as a skier came to a smashing halt last March I began to learn something new. Maybe if I share this experience with you it won't be necessary for you to go through the months of pain and nuisance in order to get a new meaning from the 12th chapter of Romans and the 12th chapter of 1 Corinthians: "For just as you have many members in one physical body and those members differ in function."

Do you suppose the Apostle Paul was a skier? There are some beautiful ski slopes not far off his beaten track. I don't go back that far into history—but Paul surely knew something about a broken leg. Maybe he had one once—who knows?

Paul refers several times to the church as the body of Christ, made up of many different specialized parts. Each of these parts depends on the other and carries out certain jobs that are its particular assignments. I have always liked to think of myself this way, as a particular part of the body of Christ, with a useful part to play. It helps me understand why not all Christians have the same talents and abilities; why some carry more of the load than others and why some are quiet, others are more noisy. It's great to realize that the body of Christ needs so many different parts. What a weird body it would be if all the parts looked alike! Here's how Paul writes it in 1 Cor. 12:18-26:

But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 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." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

What I had never really understood about this picture is how very troublesome it is when one part breaks down. The verses in Romans and 1 Corinthians had always spoken to me about the differences in our tasks—but it took a broken leg to wake me up to the rest of the meaning of these verses.

As I think back on it now, I saw my whole body, yes even my mind and my attitudes, become much less effective because of the breakdown of one part. The way Christ's work on earth gets bogged down sometimes became clearer. When there is a breakdown in one part, the whole body suffers. In our particular tasks within the body of Christ don't our individual failures slow down the cause of Christ?

During the long months of healing (the accident had really smashed up the right leg in a way not even my doctor appreciated), I learned something else. I saw how my body began to restore itself. The miracle of healing is great to watch! Doctors can't heal you. They can pin bones back together, put screws in all the right places, and sew you up neatly; but healing comes from the forces and substance God put within the great creation, the human body. Would it be stretching Paul's references to the body of Christ to suggest that the power of healing breakdowns within the church are already built in, if we will just ask God to set things straight enough so that the processes can go to work.

As I watched, first from a hospital bed, then at home, little by little moving around in my heavy cast, and now as I'm teaching the muscles how to walk again, there were definite stages in the healing process.

First, the broken leg had to be protected from *everything*. It was a full-time job to keep it safe. I had to remember not to try to turn over or even to sit up even though my back muscles groaned for a change of position and a little exercise. The next stage was one of cautious return to partial activity; but still there was no way for the leg to be useful. It required such care and put such a challenge on the rest of my body that whole new sets of muscles developed: The crutches forced my shoulders to toughen up; my mid-section had to tighten in order to pick up the off-balance strains; and the left leg . . . well, it looks like it might have been borrowed from a football player!

Suddenly it dawned on me: What a great parable of the church of Jesus Christ! When there are individual failures the whole body suffers for it—pain and a bit of groaning are to be expected. But fussing doesn't help; complaining doesn't help; sarcasm doesn't help. The only thing that counts is a set of gentle and patient steps from injury to restoration: First *protecting* the failing part, in sympathy and compassion, then willingly taking on additional loads to make up for the temporary loss, and *becoming stronger* for having helped out!

And the final step is now well under way: restoring the strength of the slowly healing leg through a whole-body program of exercise—cooperation of the well members and the weakened member!

You don't have to be a skier to learn the lesson, and you surely shouldn't be so careless as I was that tired afternoon on the icy slope. But the Lord has many ways to teach us what we need to know. I needed to know more about what to expect as a member of the body of Christ. Maybe you can learn some of this second-hand!